Under the Feet of Jesus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

Helena María Viramontes was born in Los Angeles to Mexican-American parents. She attended high school during the famous "Chicano Blowouts," a series of protests over the quality of education in schools serving Mexican-Americans. Viramontes went on to study English at Immaculate Heart College and obtain an MFA from the University of California Irvine. She published several short stories in literary journals before writing her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*. She followed this book with *Their Dogs Came with Them*. Viramontes is currently an English professor at Cornell University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

America has long relied on migrant workers, often from Latin America, to perform difficult and poorly-paid agricultural work. However, these farm laborers were largely excluded from union organizing efforts and the labor protections that were gradually extended to most workers over the course of the 20th century; for example, the 1936 National Labor Relations Act guaranteed the right to join unions and bargain collectively to most Americans, but specifically excluded agricultural laborers. In the 1960s, activists Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta fought to improve rights and quality of life for Latino agricultural workers, eventually forming the United Farm Workers union and compelling commercial growers to bargain with their employees. Today, around three million migrant or temporary farmworkers labor on American farms.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Viramontes is one of the foremost Chicana (or Mexican-American) writers. Her works tend to highlight the effects of labor exploitation and environmental degradation on Mexican-American communities: her second novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, chronicles the construction of a Los Angeles freeway and the harm this project causes to the people living around it. These themes recall the work of John Steinbeck, who famously chronicled the plight of Great Depression-era migrant laborers in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; in fact, Viramontes has been compared to Steinbeck both for her subject matter and her brusque, unembellished tone. She also focuses on the specific challenges Chicana women and children face within those communities. In this concern she's similar to fellow Chicana author Sandra Cisneros, whose novels—such as *The House on Mango Street*—celebrate the strength and resilience of Chicana women while critiquing the unjust circumstances in which they live.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Under the Feet of Jesus*
- **When Written:** 1995
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1995
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Chicano Literature
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** California
- **Climax:** Estrella and Alejo's visit to the medical clinic
- **Antagonist:** Labor exploitation, the commercial farming industry
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited (following several characters)

EXTRA CREDIT

Community Leader. As well as writing, Viramontes has led the Los Angeles Latino Writers Association, an important incubator for Latino creative voices.

Writing From Life. Like her protagonists, Viramontes's parents, Serafin and Mary Louise, were farmworkers. In her dedication of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes mentions that they met while "picking cotton."

PLOT SUMMARY

A family is driving along a rural California road when a large barn comes into view. Estrella, a thirteen-year-old girl, look out the window as her mother, Petra, confirms that this indeed the place she was looking for. They drive a little further and find an abandoned bungalow, where they park the car.

Meanwhile, two teenage boys are watching the strange car from an orchard across the street, where they are illicitly picking peaches to sell at a flea market. Gumecindo, afraid of the farm bosses and the dark, begs his cousin Alejo to go home, but the older boy reminds him that they need the money.

The family takes its few belongings from the car and start to convert the shack into a home. Petra inspects the cooking pit outside while Estrella and her siblings run towards the barn. They're intrigued and scared by the dark interior, but Perfecto (Petra's partner) soon arrives and scolds them for venturing inside a potentially unstable building.

In a series of flashbacks, Estrella and Petra reminisce about Estrella's biological father, who abandoned the family years ago. Estrella has few memories of her father, but the strongest one involves him expertly peeling an orange for her during a long drive like the one they've just finished. It's a comforting moment, but when he goes to work in Mexico and eventually loses touch, Estrella's life becomes marked by instability, unpaid bills, and hunger.

Petra suspects that her husband is going to leave long before it happens, but she's powerless to do anything to prevent it. When he finally abandons her, she's overwhelmed by the task of feeding five children on her meager wages. She's almost envious that he gets to start his life over again, while she is forever tethered to her children. During this period Petra is often distracted and tense, and Estrella takes on much of the responsibility for the children; she makes up games to distract them from hunger. One day when the children are making too much noise Petra shouts at them; taking charge of the situation, Estrella reprimands her mother and does a funny dance for the children with an empty box of Quaker oats.

Estrella also remembers the first time she met Perfecto, Petra's partner of several years. She was initially suspicious of the tool chest he carries everywhere, but the older man has now taught her the functions of all his tools. She realizes that working with his hands gives Perfecto a kind of power – much like the power of reading, which she's tried to learn during her sporadic intervals at school. However, most of the teachers are too impatient with her unkempt appearance and irregular attendance to put much effort into teaching her.

Estrella's mind floats to her strongest childhood friendship, with a girl named Maxine Devridge. Maxine is from a family of white migrant workers known for rough behavior and even crime. She has a large stash of comics stolen from her brother, but she can't read, so she relies on Estrella to interpret them. The girls often meet after work to lie in the shade of a tree and share comics, but one day, Maxine makes a rude joke about Perfecto and Petra's sexual relationship and Estrella starts a fistfight. In punishment, the foreman fires Estrella's family, but he allows the Devridges to stay.

Finally finished picking peaches, Alejo brings a sack to Estrella and Petra on his way home. He explains that he's from Texas and has only come to California to work in the fields for a summer. He's entranced by Estrella's looks and her sense of ease in her body.

The next day, Estrella and Alejo are working near each other in the fields. She thinks of the contrast between the grueling work she performs to dry grapes and the smiling, elegant woman on the raisin boxes in the supermarket. She remembers lying on top of her mother's sacks of cotton as a small girl; now, she has to keep an eye on her younger brothers, who are thirsty and tired in the hot sun. Unaccustomed to this rough work, Alejo is having trouble; he comforts himself by thinking about going to high school and eventually college, where he wants to study geology.

After work, Estrella walks to a nearby baseball diamond and clandestinely watches a Little League game. For her, it's a rare moment of leisure and solitude. However, a border patrol truck passes her on the road; frightened, she runs home. She expresses her anger at living under threat of deportation to her mother, but Petra reminds her that she has a birth certificate "under the feet of Jesus" to show she belongs in America.

For the next few days, Alejo makes an effort to talk to Estrella during the rides to and from work. He frequently asks about her plans for the future, which unsettles her because she feels that the only thing in her future is field work. One day, they stay out late at night to watch a lunar eclipse with the other piscadores, or field workers.

Meanwhile, Perfecto asks Estrella to help him tear down the old barn near the bungalow. She thinks he wants to undertake the project in order to make money, and is annoyed that yet another responsibility is being thrust upon her. In fact, Perfecto is becoming more and more preoccupied with returning to his hometown before he dies. He frequently dreams of his deceased first wife and biological children, and is thinking of leaving the family he has now. He wants to use the money from the barn to buy a new car battery and leave the family some extra cash.

That evening Alejo and Gumecindo are harvesting peaches as usual when a biplane suddenly sweeps over the orchard to spray pesticides. Alejo gets stuck in the poisonous mist, which burns his body and makes his insides feel like he's on fire. Although he tries to cling to the tree branch, he falls down and blacks out, eventually opening his eyes to see his cousin's worried face.

Estrella and Alejo, who is feeling battered and sick, spend their next lunch break huddled under a truck for shade. He tells her about tar pits, a geological phenomenon in which animal remains transform into oil over thousands of years. Gently, he kisses Estrella's hand. At the end of the day, she retreats to the cool, dark barn to think about this new development in her life.

After his encounter with the pesticide spray, Alejo soon becomes too sick to work in the fields, and his cousin doesn't know how to take care of him. Despite Perfecto's reluctance, Petra takes him in, feeds him, and tries to use folk remedies to cure him. At night he sleeps next to Estrella and the children. Although he's weak and in physical pain, he's happy to be near Estrella and relieved that if he dies, he won't be alone.

In a flashback, Petra remembers the first time she met Perfecto. She's walking to the grocery stores with all her children in tow. They have to cross a large highway to get there; she and Estrella show the frightened younger boys how to evade the cars. Next to the grocery store they see a shiny car idling in the parking lot; Petra envies its owner, thinking that his

life must be full of ease and simplicity. Inside the store, Perfecto is repairing the plumbing in exchange for some produce. When Petra inspects the selection of garlic, she finds Perfecto looking through the same bin. They exchange remarks on the vegetable's beauty and pungency, and Petra thinks to herself that this is trustworthy man. On his way out he gives the younger children some ice cubes, a rare treat.

In the present, Petra wakes up huddled next to Perfecto. She can hear Alejo and Estrella whispering on the other side of the dividing curtain. He talks about the future and asks what grade Estrella has reached in school. Eventually, she hears them moving to hold each other. Petra's hand wanders over Perfecto's body, but he pushes her away.

Petra goes outside to make the family's breakfast. She's disturbed by how quickly Estrella is growing up; soon she'll be old enough to repeat her mother's mistakes, and there's nothing she can do to stop it. That day Petra takes Alejo out to the porch, worrying about his failure to recuperate. She's no longer working in the fields, since her legs have become so swollen recently that it's hard for her to walk far. In the afternoon she feels sick and vomits behind the bungalow; this event confirms her growing suspicion that she's pregnant again, and the thought dismays her.

Estrella tells Perfecto that she will help him with the barn if he agrees to take Alejo to the doctor and pay for the visit. He agrees, and the next day they load everyone into the car, but the tire gets stuck in mud before they even leave the bungalow. After spending most of the afternoon digging it out, they arrive at the clinic in the evening. There's no doctor there, only a cloyingly sweet nurse who's eager to go home and disappointed to see them. Since neither Petra nor Perfecto speak English, Estrella has to translate everything the nurse says. After examining Alejo, she merely tells them he has dysentery and instructs them to go to the hospital. Perfecto, Petra, and Estrella are dismayed when she charges them ten dollars for this unhelpful visit, but they give her $9.07 – everything Perfecto has in his wallet.

Walking out to the car, Estrella feels overwhelmed and panicked. They've squandered their money at this useless clinic, and now they can't even afford gas to get Alejo to the hospital. Guided by instinct, she retrieves Perfecto's crowbar from the trunk, walks inside, and threatens the nurse until she returns the money. Then the family hustles Alejo into the car and quickly drives away.

Dimly aware of what's going on, Alejo is upset that Estrella committed a crime on his behalf, but she impatiently tells him not to worry about it. At the hospital, she takes him inside while the others wait in the car. He wants her to stay with him, but she has to go outside before Perfecto runs out of gas. She says goodbye to Alejo and returns to her family, not knowing if she'll ever see him alive again.

When they arrive at the bungalow, Perfecto stands by the station wagon, wondering whether he should leave the family and if the battered car will last long enough for him to do so. Sensing his restlessness, Petra goes inside and makes an offering before her icon of Jesus, under which she stores the children's birth certificates and other important documents. However, when she stands up the icon falls, and the head breaks off.

Feeling stifled and anxious, Estrella runs out of the house and towards the barn. She climbs the massive chain that hangs from the ceiling, forces open the trap door, and emerges onto the roof. There she stops and stares out at the land, hoping that her heart is "powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Estrella – The novel's protagonist, a thirteen-year-old girl and the oldest daughter in a family of Latino migrant workers. Stonily suspicious of outsiders, she's gentle and nurturing towards those she considers family. Although she's only on the cusp of adolescence, Estrella is mature beyond her years due to the familial duties she's long held. Ever since her father abandoned her mother, Petra, she's acted as her mother's confidante and helper; she cares for her younger siblings, comforts them in times of danger or hunger, and works long days in the fields to get them fed. Now, as Petra becomes more and more sick from an unintended pregnancy and Perfecto, her current partner, is succumbing to the exhaustion of old age, Estrella emerges even more strongly as the head of the family; she acts as its economic support and also makes key decisions, like presiding over her friend Alejo's visit to the medical clinic. In the midst of all this, Estrella tries to safeguard her inner life and explore her own identity. Her brief romance with Alejo allows her to act like a teenager, rather than a responsible adult; he also encourages her to think about a future outside the fields and develop new hopes for her life. However, Alejo's eventual illness forces Estrella to care for him as well, and emphasizes the fact that for her, coming of age is a process of accruing more and more responsibilities. By the end of the novel, Estrella has settled into her new position as head of her family and accepted that, due to her impoverished and socially disadvantaged status, her ability to protect them is extremely limited.

Petra – Estrella's mother and one of the novel's key protagonists. Although she's only thirty-five, Petra is prematurely aged from years of harsh fieldwork. Already the mother of five children, over the course of the novel she discovers that she has conceived another child with Perfecto. Despite the poverty and instability in which she lives, Petra

manages to be a devoted and loving mother. She instills her children with dignity and moral strength, reminding Estrella not to be ashamed of her work, which feeds other people, and instructing her how to behave if she encounters the border patrol. At the same time, she's often passive about their futures and her own: she accepts that her children will have to work in the fields together, and as she observes Estrella growing up she worries that her daughter is fated to repeat her mistakes, rather than hoping she could avoid them. Her passivity contrasts with the sense of hopefulness and agency that Estrella possesses at the beginning of the novel, and eventually loses. The constant work that Petra puts into feeding, washing, and protecting her children – even when she is growing gradually sicker from her pregnancy – casts motherhood as a kind of heroism. At the same time, she's markedly isolated in this mammoth task. Her first husband has long abandoned her and even Perfecto, her current partner, is thinking of leaving the family; meanwhile, American society appears completely indifferent to the welfare of her or her children. Through Petra, the novel both praises the efforts of individual mothers and argues that migrant motherhood is a harrowing and oppressive experience.

Perfecto Flores – Petra's current partner, a repairman and field worker several decades her senior. Mild-mannered and practical, Perfecto is slow to anger and quick to perform small kindnesses: he clears the bungalow of dead birds before they frighten Petra and teaches Estrella how to use all his tools. He's become an indispensible father figure to all the children, and although Estrella sometimes resents his assumption of authority, he's a positive foil to her "real" father, who abandoned the family years ago and has no interest in his children's welfare. However, as Perfecto contemplates approaching old age, he becomes more and more obsessed with returning to his home town before he dies. As he grows to suspect that Petra is pregnant, he's overwhelmed by the potential responsibility of fathering a child and actively contemplates leaving the family for good. Perfecto's inner dilemma shows that although he often cares for the children admirably, he's unable to take complete responsibility for them as Petra and Estrella do, even when it means forfeiting their personal desires. Ultimately, Perfecto represents his society's tendency to exempt fathers from responsibility while placing the burdens of parenthood squarely on mothers.

Alejo – Estrella's love interest, a teenager from Texas working in the fields for the summer. Alejo first catches sight of Estrella while illicitly picking peaches from the orchards and becomes entranced by her and her family. Like Estrella, Alejo is born into an impoverished and disadvantaged Latino family; since his mother has died and his father left the family, he lives with his grandmother, who works several difficult jobs in order to keep him in school. However, because his family are not migrant laborers, he's lived in one place his entire life and been able to attend school regularly. Bolstered by these slight advantages, Alejo has hopes and dreams which haven't occurred to Estrella – he plans to attend high school and college, and he encourages her to think about these things as well. Alejo's sense of potential and agency contrasts starkly with Petra's passive acceptance of her lot in life and exclusion from mainstream society. Despite his optimism, Alejo is seriously injured after getting caught in a pesticide spray and becomes reliant on Estrella and Petra for care; by the end of the novel, his condition has deteriorated so much that they are forced to leave him at the hospital, not knowing if he will live or die. Alejo's bleak illness and uncertain future demonstrate how difficult it is even for the most motivated individuals to singlehandedly overcome the obstacles posed by social injustice.

Estrella's Real Father – The unnamed man who was once Petra's husband and the head of Estrella's family. Both Petra and Estrella remember him as a glamorous, almost mythical figure: Estrella reminisces on his impressive ability to peel an orange in one piece, while Petra remarks on his charismatic, larger-than-life personality. However, his abandonment of his family is a glaring character flaw; despite his charm, he seems to lack the determination and responsibility which both Petra and Estrella possess in abundance. He's a foil to Perfecto, who is currently acting as a dutiful father figure to the children. At the same time, Perfecto's growing desire to leave the family links him to Estrella's father; together, they point out the vastly different social expectations that govern the behavior of fathers and mothers.

Perla – Estrella's younger sister and Cookie's twin. The twins are often too curious for their own good; they have to be stopped from eating bugs and are quick to venture into dangerous places, like the dark barn. They're also loving and affectionate, quickly taking to strangers like Alejo and awed by the strength and capability of their oldest sister.

Cookie - Estrella's younger sister and Perla's twin. The twins are often too curious for their own good; they have to be stopped from eating bugs and they are quick to venture into dangerous places, like the dark barn. They're also loving and affectionate, quickly taking to strangers like Alejo and awed by the strength and capability of their oldest sister.

Gumecindo – Alejo's cousin, with whom he has traveled from Texas to work in the fields. While Alejo is decisive and spontaneous – electing to clandestinely harvest peaches and pursuing Estrella determinedly – Gumecindo nervously follows his cousin's lead. After Alejo becomes sick from his encounter with the pesticides, Gumecindo doesn't know how to care for him and relinquishes the responsibility to Estrella and Petra while he returns to his hometown.

Maxine Devridge – Estrella's most memorable childhood friend. Maxine comes from a family of white migrant laborers known for rough behavior and even criminality – she owns a

trove of comic books that her brothers have stolen and on first visiting her cabin, Estrella notes that the family's mattress is covered in urine stains. The girls become close when Estrella reads out the comics to Maxine, who is illiterate. However, after Maxine insults Petra and she and Estrella have a fistfight, the farm's foreman evicts Estrella's family while letting the Devridges stay. This abrupt end to their friendship shows that while the conditions of migrant labor harm laborers of all races, Estrella's family's Latino ethnicity makes them subject to additional injustices.

The Nurse – An apathetic worker at the medical clinic where Estrella and her family take Alejo. Speaking condescendingly to him and patronizing Petra and Perfecto, who don't speak English, the nurse is able to give Alejo no useful treatment but simply suggests the family take him to a hospital. Throughout the visit her cheerful and officious personality contrasts with Alejo's dire state and the family's struggle to get him adequate medical care. The nurse is one of the few middle-class Americans to appear in the novel, and her inability to connect with the family at all or appreciate their plight highlights their exclusion from society and their inability to access basic social services.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ricky – One of Estrella's younger brothers. Close in age to Arnulfo, he's too young to work in the fields, but rather than attending school, he has to sit aimlessly on the sidelines while his mother and sister labor.

Arnulfo – One of Estrella's younger brothers. Close in age to Ricky, he's too young to work in the fields, but rather than attending school, he has to sit aimlessly on the sidelines while his mother and sister labor.

The Boy – A mysterious young boy with a harelip who appears sometimes to Estrella and Alejo. It's unclear if the boy is an actual wandering child or a kind of hallucination, but his character seems to represent the plight of all migrant laborers.

TERMS

La Migra – Spanish slang for the border patrol. **Petra** frequently worries that La Migra will deport her children, even though they were born in America, and Estrella once runs from a police car that she encounters on her way home from work.

Piscador / Piscadora – The Spanish word for "harvester." In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, it's used to describe everyone who works in the fields.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE VALUE OF LABOR

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, a family of Latino migrant workers travels through California in search of work on commercial farms. For Petra, her partner Perfecto, and her daughter Estrella, each day is consumed by backbreaking work, in both the fields and the decrepit bungalow they call home. While constantly emphasizing the grueling nature of their labor, Viramontes also presents it as ennobling, a source of dignity and pride for the family. At the same time, their work is undervalued by their employers and ignored by the society that surrounds them. Especially for Estrella, who is coming to terms with her future as a piscadora, or field laborer, the tragedy of her abysmal working conditions is compounded by the deliberate erasure of her labor by the corporations and consumers who benefit from it.

The family's determination to do their work well reflects their values and love for each other. In particular, Estrella expresses her admiration for Petra by admiring her ability to work. For example, she observes her mother squatting to cook breakfast as soon as she wakes up and remembers that as a child she used to sleep on Petra's sack of cotton while her mother dragged her through the fields. The novel's loving description of Petra's hands moving over the cooking pit to sustain her family, and Estrella's tender description of this "gentle and pleasing" childhood moment, emphasize the connection between work and familial love.

Whenever they perceive that someone thinks their work in the fields isn't worthwhile, Petra and Estrella sharply point out that there's nothing wrong with "picking the vegetables people'll be eating for dinner." Even though their job is a mark of low economic status and social exclusion, they turn it into a badge of honor.

But while the novel's characters respect the work they do, the author steers clear of romanticizing it. Viramontes constantly references the aches and pains that plague Perfecto, Estrella, and Petra after a day of work. The strain of work in the field makes Petra feel like an old woman, although she's only thirty-three; as the summer progresses Estrella is disturbed to discover that she's starting to walk with a stoop, a reflection of the permanent toll the fields are taking on her body.

Moreover, the backbreaking labor of the fields renders the characters too exhausted to do more than eat and sleep after the workday is over. They have no energy to play or even think, much less do anything to improve their circumstances. Agricultural labor thus requires them to sacrifice not just their bodies, but their inner lives.

Although the Herculean effort of physical labor dominates the family's life, it remains undervalued and largely invisible to the society around them. In one chapter, Estrella describes the exhausting process of harvesting heavy baskets of grapes, dragging them across the field, and arranging them on special frames to dry into raisins. She contrasts this labor, which she performs in the blazing sun, to the advertising graphics on the finished cans of raisins, which show a relaxed and elegant woman holding out a basket of fruit. Estrella resents that the companies selling raisins ignore the effort needed to produce them; her feelings reflect the eagerness of agricultural corporations to minimize their workers' labor in order to avoid regulation or oversight.

Alejo expresses the same feelings by explaining the phenomenon of tar pits to Estrella. Although the fuel and gas on which everyone relies derives from the condensed bodies of prehistoric animals, they rarely get any acknowledgment of their sacrifice. Much like the animals in the tar pits, the sacrifices that Alejo and Estrella make are ignored by the society around them, which wishes to consume cheap goods without thinking too much about why they're so cheap.

This phenomenon of erasure is an economic and social issue: if everyone refuses to acknowledge the plight of migrant workers, it's hard for them to gain rights and improve their circumstances. But to Estrella, it's also an existential threat. At one point, she compares herself to a prehistoric girl falling into the tar pits, leaving behind "no details of her life…no piece of cloth, no ring." Especially because work shapes her entire life, the erasure of her labor corresponds to the erasure of her very identity.

The omnipresence of labor in Estrella's life coincides with the invisibility of that labor in the world around her. Ultimately, this contrast is a stern indictment both of corporations who create these appalling conditions and society at large, which turns a blind eye in order to reap their benefits.

MOTHERHOOD

Under the Feet of Jesus chronicles a Latino family's struggle to escape poverty and establish a secure life. In particular, the novel focuses on the challenges of motherhood amid the abysmal working conditions that prevail for migrant workers. For Petra, newly pregnant with her sixth child, and her oldest daughter Estrella, who has become a surrogate parent to her younger siblings, motherhood is a source of pride and strength. However, the women's devotion to their children contrasts with the indifference of their male partners and of the larger society in which they live. Given this complete lack of support, both Petra and Estrella often find parenting oppressive and overwhelming. While the novel's mother figures are portrayed as heroes, motherhood itself emerges as an isolating experience that emphasizes the particular ways in which migrant women suffer from their social conditions.

The novel gives careful attention to the thankless tasks of mothering, and these depictions are some of its most touching scenes. One of Estrella's strongest childhood memories is being carried through the fields by Petra as her mother worked. Now that she herself is a laborer, she understands how exhausting that must have been for Petra, and appreciates her mother's sacrifice. In another chapter, Estrella watches as her mother carefully bathes and dries her twins Cookie and Perla, even though the two fight her continuously and proceed to get dirty as soon as she's finished.

Moreover, Estrella herself is becoming a mother to her younger siblings. In a flashback, Petra remembers her daughter's brave efforts to distract her siblings from their hunger during a particularly harsh period. Now, as they ride to the fields in the morning, she cradles Ricky's tired face; when her brothers are exhausted and thirsty in the fields she keeps them from wandering off or becoming dehydrated. Her behavior at these moments indicates her growing maturity.

Despite the conditions in which they live, the novel's mothers remain gentle with their children and constantly strive to protect them. By focusing on the effort of these everyday tasks, the novel casts motherhood as an act of heroism and even defiance of their degrading circumstances.

However, the love and value with which women treat their children contrasts with the callousness and absence of their male partners. A large section of the novel focuses on Estrella's father's abandonment, which occurred several years before the present action. In the lead-up to this catastrophe, Petra feels that she has to struggle to maintain her partner's interest in their family, even though it's a mutual responsibility. While to her the children represent a set of permanent obligations, he still feels that "his life belonged to no one but him" and is able to discard his family at will.

In many ways, Perfecto is a much better replacement for Estrella's "real" father; he's dutiful about providing for his adopted family, even though the children aren't his. However, he wants to return to his hometown and is contemplating leaving the family to do so, despite Petra's new pregnancy. Much as it does for Estrella's father, fatherhood falls below personal concerns on Perfecto's list of priorities.

Especially after her first husband leaves, Petra feels overwhelmed by the task of caring for her children and "almost jealous" of his decision to pursue individual happiness at the expense of his family. She doesn't always want to be a mother, but for her it's not a choice. While Petra's interactions with her children show motherhood as an act of willing devotion, the contrast between her behavior and that of her male partners shows that because of social gender norms, motherhood is constraining and burdensome in a way that fatherhood is not.

Just as motherhood occurs without the support of male

partners, it also takes place against a backdrop of pernicious social indifference. In one of Estrella's childhood memories, a teacher asks her "how come her mama never gave her a bath," a rude question that contrasts with the image of Petra bathing the twins. This moment shows that social insitutions don't actually care about the welfare of migrant children; rather, they judge them for the desperate circumstances in which they live.

After Estrella's father leaves and the family is faced with economic crisis, Estrella tries to distract her hungry siblings by dancing in front of them with an empty can of Quaker oatmeal. Since consumer goods symbolize the middle class throughout the novel, the oatmeal can represents this more privileged group's lack of interest in poor children, and their refusal to create social conditions in which mothers can actually take care of their children. This social critique suggests that Estrella's desperate attempts to make her siblings feel better will lead to nothing as long as society is indifferent to their welfare.

Throughout the novel, the possibility of birth defects caused by pesticides is also constant concern for Estrella and Petra. Petra always covers her mouth in the field to minimize exposure, and now that she's a teenager Estrella frequently worries that her children will be born "without mouths." This recurring image represents mothers' lack of agency to protect their children. For Estrella, the constant striving that motherhood entails contrasts with the unwillingness of her corporate employers to take action against the most preventable of dangers.

By depicting motherhood within extremely harsh conditions, Viramontes brings attention to the bravery and determination demonstrated by individual mothers. At the same time, she criticizes the refusal of men and social institutions to provide desperately needed support and resources, ultimately evincing a deep ambivalence about becoming a mother in such an indifferent world.

RACE AND MARGINALIZATION

Under the Feet of Jesus describes the lives of migrant laborers who harvest the food on which the rest of America relies. By focusing on Estrella's sense of extreme estrangement from the society in which she lives, the novel emphasizes the social and economic gulf between middle-class Americans and the workers living on the fringes of society. For Latino families like Estrella's, this marginalization is compounded by racism and the threat of deportation, which prevent them even further from feeling at home in America. Their experience contrasts with that of white migrants, who share the same economic conditions but escape other forms of oppression because of their whiteness. While the novel draws attention to the plight of all agricultural workers, it shows how race interacts with class oppression to make the experience of marginalization even more intense.

The family's social marginalization is most clear through its few encounters with middle-class American life. In one episode, Petra is crossing a dangerous highway with her children to go grocery shopping. Noticing a beautiful car at a gas station, she envies its owner as a man who "returned to the same bed, who could tell where the schools and where the stores are, and where the Nescafé coffee jars in the stores were located." For Petra, a permanent home and sense of belonging in a community—things many Americans take for granted—are completely unattainable luxuries. Her sense of distance from the basic elements of middle-class life emphasizes her exclusion from that society.

In another moment, Estrella goes to a baseball field after work and covertly watches a Little League game. What she sees as an exotic spectacle is actually the recreational activity of boys her own age who have leisure time and economic resources. While the boys under the lights see playing sports as a normal part of their lives, she feels it's a luxury simply to have a moment to sit down at the fringes of their game; her wonder at this experience emphasizes the gulf between her upbringing and theirs.

It's not just their economic status but also racial discrimination that makes the family feel cut off from mainstream America. On her way home from the Little League game Estrella spots a van from La Migra, or the border police; she dives into the bushes and runs home in fear and anger. Although Petra proudly reminds her that she was born in America and has a birth certificate to prove it, Estrella still fears deportation because of her race. The proximity of these two incidents shows how racial discrimination compounds economic disadvantage.

Estrella often feels uncomfortable in public spaces, both physical and intellectual, because of her race. While listening to the radio during a break from work, she hears people calling in to make jokes about "wetbacks" (a slur for Latin American immigrants); this makes her feel that radio entertainment, something which most Americans use and enjoy, is set up to exclude and humiliate her. Recalling her brief period at school, she describes being consigned to the back of the classroom with the other migrant children. This explicit, special marginalization suggests that she doesn't belong in school and doesn't have the same claim to an education as more advantaged, white children.

Estrella's brief friendship with Maxine Devridge, the daughter of a white migrant family, emphasizes the intersection of class and racial marginalization. In their values and behavior, Maxine's family is arguably worse-off than Estrella's; she remembers Maxine's mother displaying urine stains on her mattress without shame, and Petra warns her daughter to stay away from the family due to its rowdy lifestyle. Unlike Estrella, Maxine has not learned to read, and she relies on her friend to interpret her stolen comics.

However, Maxine feels secure in her status as an American, while Estrella constantly has to demonstrate that she

belongs—for example, when the two girls meet, Maxine asks if she "speaks American," forcing her to prove her nationality. While the Devridges share the abysmal living conditions of the migrant camp, they don't live under the threat of displacement as Estrella's family does. Maxine never has to worry about La Migra picking her up, and when she and Estrella have a fistfight, it's the Latino family who gets kicked out of the camp as a consequence. While the novel doesn't minimize the struggles of Maxine's family, it shows that Estrella's faces even more obstacles by virtue of their race.

Throughout the novel, Estrella's life is characterized by social marginalization. While some of her experiences apply to anyone in her economic circumstances, some hardships are specific to the Latino community. Ultimately, the novel uses this pattern to show how racism compounds economic disadvantage and makes it extremely difficult for Latino families to climb out of poverty.

COMING OF AGE

Under the Feet of Jesus centers around Estrella, a thirteen-year-old migrant laborer in California. Despite her young age, Estrella's abundance of younger siblings and impoverished circumstances mean that she has to take on an adult role in her family. Estrella's few typical teenage experiences, like her romance with Alejo (a teenager new to fieldwork), are fraught and short-lived; for her, becoming a woman means taking on more and more responsibilities, especially as Petra and Perfecto are unable to fulfill them. Yet while adulthood confers great responsibility, little agency comes with it, and Estrella is often frustrated by her inability to solve the many problems that arise. Ending with Estrella's rooftop revelation that she's both holding her family together and has little power to actually protect it, the novel meditates on the tragic circumstances of young people coming of age in a world that provides almost no opportunity to improve their circumstances.

Rather than enjoying her time as a teenager, Estrella has to take on responsibilities that have traditionally belonged to Petra and Perfecto. Estrella has always helped Petra with the housework, especially after her father's abandonment. As Petra becomes sicker and more distracted, Estrella is more responsible for household tasks, and watches over the younger children while she's working in the fields. Moreover, when Petra eventually becomes unable to work, Estrella becomes the family's main economic support as well; at one point, Petra remarks that without Estrella, the family wouldn't be able to eat, highlighting the transferal of responsibility and emphasizing the burden Estrella is now carrying.

Estrella also learns many elements of Perfecto's trade and has to help him with many traditionally masculine tasks, such as tearing down the abandoned barn. Especially given that Perfecto is considering leaving the family, this behavior reflects the extent to which Estrella has to act as a mother *and* a father to her siblings.

At first, Estrella's youthful romance with Alejo seems like a contrast to these weighty responsibilities; the scene in which they kiss each other's palms in the fields reminds the reader that Estrella is in fact a teenager who should be exploring her own identity, rather than worrying about feeding her family. However, after Alejo grows ill, Estrella becomes responsible for him as well. For Estrella, coming of age is the process of becoming a caretaker to more and more people.

While she's acquiring more responsibilities, Estrella realizes how powerless she is to truly protect those she loves. At the beginning of the novel, Estrella's body appears strong and youthful; she hops over fences and wrestles with her brothers. However, after weeks of working in the fields she's disturbed to find herself lacking energy and walking with a constant stoop; she can't stand that her shadow looks like that of an old person. Estrella's physical transformation shows her that she's going to replace her parents as a precarious caretaker, rather than achieving greater security for her family.

Similarly, while Estrella is initially optimistic about curing Alejo's mysterious illness, she's startled and dismayed to find that Petra's traditional methods are ineffective against it. Eventually, Alejo's worsening state forces her to interact with the American medical system, which yields no results and in which she feels bullied and disregarded. Estrella's feelings of responsibility for Alejo contrast with her inability to achieve anything concrete on his behalf.

The novel ends with two moments of extreme action and passivity, reflecting the clash between Estrella's desire to care for her family and her newfound cognizance of her limited agency. When Estrella brings Alejo to the clinic, she has to interact with the nurse and make all the decisions, because her parents don't speak English. Frustrated to be charged precious money for a useless visit, Estrella spontaneously grabs a crowbar and threatens the nurse until she returns the money. This action reflects Estrella's burden of responsibility and even her optimism: she wouldn't do something so drastic unless she believed that it could lead to a good outcome for Alejo. Here she contrasts starkly with Petra and Perfecto, who are jaded by a lifetime of disappointments and passively accept the dismal results of the clinic visit.

Despite her action and bravery, Estrella still has to leave Alejo at the hospital, with no assurances of his safety or their eventual reunification. In contrast with her behavior at the clinic, this moment signals her acceptance of her limited power. After returning home, she climbs to the roof of the barn and looks out over the land. Although she describes her "heart" as "powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed," this is essentially a moment of passivity, in which she acknowledges that she can only hope for the best, rather than do anything to achieve it.

Though she's coming of age under harsh circumstances, Estrella strives for optimism—even though she's fully cognizant of her life's hardships, she truly believes she can fix the problems facing her family. Tragically, Estrella's retreat into passivity and inaction at the end of the novel argues that, for impoverished migrant children, a large part of growing up is relinquishing that sense of optimism and agency.

CONSUMERISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, a Latino family of migrant workers ekes out an existence in rural California. Given their lack of economic resources, the family relies on the natural world for both shelter and sustenance; their understanding of the environment allows them to survive and emphasizes their lack of consumption of material goods. The family's respect for the natural world contrasts with the agricultural industry's rampant exploitation of the land, especially their use of pesticides, in order to produce more and more consumer goods. A motif throughout the novel, pesticide use and its consequences show that environmental integrity and public health are inextricably linked, and provide another indictment against commercial farming practices.

Estrella and her family are characterized by their ability to live within the environment, rather than relying on consumer goods. In the novel's opening scenes, the family arrives and settles at a broken-down bungalow. Using only what they have with them and what they can find in nature, they transform the shack into a temporary home. At one point, Petra even remarks that "horsetail weed" is "just as good for scouring as steel wool," underlining the fact that when she faces a problem she turns to nature, rather than going to the store.

While the novel's tone is often clipped and tense, its descriptions of nature are loving and lyrical. As Alejo is stealing peaches from a tree, for example, he remarks eloquently on the "resinous branches" and the wasps' legs which "dangled like golden threads." Language like this emphasizes how precious the environment is—especially to young people like Estrella and Alejo, who have few material pleasures or luxuries.

Of course, it's important that the family's ingenuity and lack of consumption is also a matter of necessity, not choice. At one point, Petra encapsulates her dream of a better life by saying she'd like to be the kind of person who "knows where the Nescafé is" in the supermarket. The novel praises Estrella's family for its respect for the environment, but in the sense that Petra and Estrella often reference consumer goods when discussing their own deprivation, consumption also represents the class inequities they face every day.

By contrast, the commercial farms the family works for are exploiting the environment in order to produce more and more consumer goods. Commercial farming is necessary to produce the cheap goods on which, during this era, America is becoming more and more reliant. Even though Estrella is unable to afford those goods, she's cognizant that her work makes possible a culture of consumption: while drying grapes into raisins, she imagines the branded packaging under which they'll eventually be sold.

Large-scale farming can be harmful to the environment in many ways, but the novel focuses on one particular factor: the use of pesticides. Viramontes frequently references the biplanes that spray the fields—and everything around them—with chemicals. Consequently, Estrella is unable to trust the environment in which she is so thoroughly rooted. In one passage, she's looking thirstily at a stream with her friend Maxine, but because they know the water is contaminated, neither girl drinks. At another moment, Estrella mentions wiping pesticides off a juicy tomato before biting into it. In both cases, evocative natural descriptions—from the burbling stream to the ripe fruit—contrast with the contamination and danger caused by commercial farming practices. In this context, even positive descriptions of the environment create a threatening and uneasy atmosphere.

Instances in which characters directly suffer from pesticide contamination show the connection between environmental degradation and public health; they also turn the metaphor of consumption on its head, showing that commercial farming consumes people as much as it allows others to consume. Petra and Estrella worry constantly about giving birth to deformed babies; in particular, they reference a phenomenon of babies being born without mouths due to pesticide contamination. This fear shows that it's important to safeguard the environment not just for its own sake, but to protect public health. The grotesque idea of mouth-less babies is also important because it highlights their literal inability to consume (not to mention have their own voice). This image emphasizes that in order to give middle-class consumers access to a wide variety of cheap goods, some people forfeit their right to consume any goods at all.

Alejo's encounter with the pesticide biplane—triggering an illness from which he never recovers—is one of the novel's most tragic moments. He describes the poisonous spray as "swallowing his waist and torso," "squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs," and finally "erasing him." Here, Viramontes uses the language of consumption to show how the pesticides are literally obliterating Alejo. This moment is a powerful foil to the cheerful advertising imagery used to make goods like fruit attractive to consumers. It also makes an important connection between the environment and the people who work it, both of whom are preyed upon by pesticides in order to facilitate the material consumption of more privileged classes.

Throughout the novel, poignant descriptions of the striking California environment contrast with the commercial farming industry's exploitation of that environment, especially through

pesticide use. These clashing motifs bring attention to the environmental degradation that often accompanies the production of cheap consumer goods and argue that, like the environment, agricultural workers are "consumed" by pesticides in order to allow other people to consume material goods—ultimately making a connection between environmental and social justice.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CONSUMER GOODS

The novel is peppered with references to brand names and consumer goods, which usually occur during situations of particular hardship or when characters are thinking about the things they lack. When she's doing the backbreaking labor of drying grapes, Estrella thinks of the unrealistically elegant and clean woman who adorns the raisin boxes at the supermarket. When she's interpreting comics for her friend Maxine, who can't read and lives in a filthy shack, she's entranced by advertisements for laundry detergent. Petra encapsulates her hopes for a better life in her desire to be a person who "knows where the Nescafe" is at the supermarket. While lying ill in the family's bungalow, Alejo remarks that Estrella smells like "Eagles' condensed milk."

Corporations and advertisers intend brand names and goods to represent comfort, leisure, and the relatively high quality of life now available to the middle class; the family's allusions to them reflect their absorption of these media campaigns, since they almost always mention consumer goods when thinking of the life they want to have. However, by planting these references in the midst of hardship and tragedy – like the young children's hunger or Alejo's incurable illness – Viramontes transforms them into emblems of poverty. Ultimately, consumer goods represent the enormous gulf between families like Estrella's and the middle-class lifestyle that their hard work facilitates.

JESUCRISTO AND THE DOCUMENTS

One of the first things Petra does after arriving at the bungalow is set up her prized icon of Jesus (whom she calls "Jesucristo"), the candles that surround it, and her children's American birth certificates, which lie beneath his feet – the origin of the novel's name. Jesucristo represents her Christian faith, which – intermixed with indigenous folk rituals – comforts her in times of need. Petra's careful storage of the birth certificates underneath represents her desire for her children to have legal status in America and her faith that, presented with these proofs of their belonging, the state will treat them with respect and accept them. Despite her transitory lifestyle, the arrangement provides Petra with a limited sense of security; it represents her abiding faith in both religion and the state, even though neither entity has done much to help her thus far.

However, Estrella's possession of a legal American birth certificate does little to assist her. She still has to flee from La Migra when she encounters border patrol cars, and she still receives substandard treatment when she has to take Alejo to the clinic. Moreover, after Petra makes an offering at the end of the novel, the statue of Jesucristo falls to the ground and breaks. Coming at a moment when the family's resources are exhausted and crisis seems inevitable, this symbolic moment represents the failure of both institutions – religion and the state – to protect them.

CARS

Cars frequently appear as symbols in 20th-century American literature. Endowing their owners with mobility and agency, they allow people to make their individual way in the world and fulfill the "American Dream" of success and prosperity. The beautiful green car that Petra encounters during one trip to the grocery store is a perfect example of this symbolism; seeing it, she immediately envisions its owner as prosperous and satisfied, prominent in his community and friendly with his neighbors. By contrast, her lack of a car means that even a simple trip to the store is an all-day event, during which her young children must cross highways on foot and expose themselves to danger. Just as she does with her depiction of consumer goods, Viramontes shifts the symbolism of the car, turning it into a representation of Petra's lack of social mobility and inability to fulfill the American Dream.

Of course, the most prominent car in the novel is Perfecto's battered station wagon. At the beginning of the novel the entire family is crammed into this car, searching for another temporary home; for them, the car represents a negative kind of mobility, the transitory and unsettled nature of their life as migrants. What limited agency the family has depends on their ability to drive in this car, but it also fails them at crucial moments, for example getting stuck in the mud when they try to drive Alejo to the clinic. Estrella remarks that "the car running" is one of the factors that determines their ability to work, and thus eat. In this sense the car emblematizes the uncertainty and instability that prevent her family from climbing out of poverty.

THE BARN

At the beginning of the novel, Estrella and her family make their temporary home in an abandoned bungalow which is situated next to a large and empty barn. Estrella and her siblings are both intrigued and frightened by it,

and Perfecto brusquely warns them to stay away from the unstable structure. However, Estrella frequently returns to the barn when she needs to be alone. After Alejo first kisses her hand she retreats to the barn to contemplate this new development; when she's frustrated with the disastrous visit to the medical clinic, she wishes desperately that she could return to the barn and cry. In this sense, the barn represents the importance of Estrella's inner life and the need to carve out some solitude in the midst of her crowded life.

At the same time, the barn is under threat from Perfecto, who wants to tear it down and sell the materials. When he first mentions this plan Estrella explicitly identifies herself with the barn, saying that she is being used up and torn down just like it is. The constant threat of demolition demonstrates the extent to which Estrella's inner life and independent identity are constantly assailed by her harsh work and her obligations to her family.

After dropping Alejo off at the hospital, Estrella runs into the barn and climbs up to the trap door leading onto the roof. There, she contemplates the fact that even though she's done everything in her power to save her friend, she may never see him again. The novel ends on her hope that her heart is "powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed." This is partly an affirmation of Estrella's sense of individuality and personal identity, which has always felt strongest in the barn. However, since at this point she has exhausted all possibility of action and can do nothing but hope, it also represents Estrella's limited individual ability to effect change in the world around her.

TAR PITS

A geological phenomenon, tar pits are naturally-occurring pools of asphalt that form from the remains of plant and animal matter. Alejo, who aspires to go to college and study geology, explains the tar pits to Estrella during one of their lunch breaks in the fields, telling her how animals' remains eventually transform into the oil that currently powers the world. While his fascination signals his intellectual curiosity and potential, both he and Estrella reference tar pits at moments when they feel their labor is being exploited and ignored. After Alejo gets sprayed by pesticides, he imagines himself "sinking into the tar pits" and being completely erased, leaving behind "no story or family, or bone." Similarly, when Estrella is trying without success to dig the station wagon out of the mud and take Alejo to the clinic, she imagines herself as a prehistoric girl falling into the tar pits, leaving behind "no details of her life" no matter how hard she may have worked. Later, she makes a direct comparison between her family and the tar pits, saying that "the oil was made from their bones" – in other words, that people like her produce the goods on which American society relies. All these moments demonstrate how the grueling physical labor Estrella and Alejo are forced to perform erodes their sense of personal identity. Moreover, it represents their sense that their work is invisible to those around them: like the anonymous prehistoric animals, they are providing essential services to society without enjoying meaningful rights or compensation. Ultimately, tar pits symbolize the contrast between the harsh conditions of migrant labor and the refusal of society to acknowledge that labor.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *Under the Feet of Jesus* published in 2014.

Chapter One Quotes

"The silence and the barn and the clouds meant many things. It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Petra, Perfecto Flores

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

At the outset of the novel, Estrella and her family arrive at an abandoned bungalow by a large barn, which they plan to make their home during the harvesting season. Finding a place to live should provide them with a sense of stability, but in fact it makes them think of all the ways their work could go wrong and leave them utterly without resources. This passage establishes the family as hardworking people who are nevertheless constantly undermined by the circumstances around their work: if the harvest is bad they could be laid off without warning; if they can't transport themselves, they can't work; and if they get sick, they have no access to medical care. These are larger social issues, which could be solved with the implementation of adequate protections for workers. That they persist in preventing Estrella's escape from poverty is a testament not to her family's abilities but to the indifference of the society around them.

> What impressed her most was the way his thumbnail plowed the peel off the orange in one long spiral, as if her father plowed the sun, as if it meant something to him to peel the orange from stem to naval without breaking the circle.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Estrella's Real Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback, Estrella recalls a moment with her biological father during a long drive towards work – much like the one her family has just completed now. When they stop by an orchard to rest, Petra covertly swipes some oranges and Estrella's father impresses her with his efficient way of peeling the fruit. During the workday, orchards like this are the site of the family's exploitation and degradation, yet both Petra and Estrella's father use this moment to reclaim their dignity and affirm the value of their work. By taking the oranges without permission, Petra exercises her right to benefit from her own labor and implicitly asserts the injustice of the meager wages and lack of labor protections that, in most ways, keep her from doing so. Meanwhile, the use of the word "plow" to describe Estrella's father's action implicitly compares this task, which brings him satisfaction and which another person values, to the work he performs in the fields, which is undervalued and for which he gets little in return. This passage sets up the contrast between the family's respect for work and the lack of acknowledgement (financial or social) they receive for their labor in the outside world.

> The women in the camps had advised the mother, *To run away from your husband would be a mistake*. He would stalk her and the children, not because he wanted them back, they proposed, but because it was a slap in the face, and he would swear over the seventh beer that he would find her and kill them all. Estrella's godmother said the same thing and more. *You'll be a forever alone woman*, she said to Estrella's mother, *nobody wants a woman with a bunch of orphans, nobody*.

Related Characters: Petra (speaker), Estrella's Real Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

While Estrella recalls her few concrete memories of her father, Petra remembers the long-ago dissolution of her marriage. Petra feels that her husband is being a bad partner and father, yet she also worries that leaving him might provoke disastrous consequences. The opinions express by the camp women and Estrella's godmother show the vastly different expectations for paternal and maternal behavior. The women correctly assume that Petra will devote her life to taking care of her children; describing her as "a woman with a bunch of orphans," they subsume her personal identity into her status as a mother. On the other hand, they predict that her husband might take violent revenge on her and the children to satisfy his own wounded pride. Such an act – and the women's implicit acceptance of it – would show that for him, the children are like accessories to his personal identity and serve to enlarge or diminish his sense of himself. While Estrella's father never does anything so drastic, the novel will show the tendency of men to renounce familial obligations while women assume additional burdens.

> He had the nerve, damn him, the spine to do it. She was almost jealous.

Related Characters: Petra (speaker), Estrella's Real Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

While Petra sometimes contemplates leaving her husband, in fact it's he who abandons the family, plunging them into destitution and chaos. As a single mother, Petra isn't able to make enough money to feed her children, and she's overwhelmed by the extent of her obligations and her inability to fulfill them. At times, she even envies her husband's freedom, and wishes she had been able to walk away from this domestic morass. While the novel often lionizes Petra's efforts as a mother – her very use of the word "spine" to describe her husband ironically points out her own fortitude in caring for the children – bleak moments like this show that, without social protections or real expectations of paternal involvement, motherhood is necessarily difficult and oppressive.

Moreover, Petra's thoughts here contradict the camp women's earlier acceptance of diverging parental roles for

men and women. For them, the fact that a woman orients her life around her children, while a man is free to leave at any time, seems to reflect a kind of natural order. However, Petra's guilty jealousy shows that she too longs for an independent identity and a second chance at life; for her, there's nothing natural about caring for five children under impossible circumstances. Perhaps the only reason Petra doesn't run away is that she lacks the knowledge in which her husband is secure: that someone else will deal with their children.

❝ Then, she remembered her father who worked carrying sixty pounds of cement, the way he flung the sacks over his hunching shoulders for their daily meal, the weight bending his back like a mangled nail; and then she remembered her eldest daughter trying to feed the children with noise, pounding her feet drumming her hand and dancing loca to no music at all, dancing loca with the full of empty Quaker man.

Related Characters: Petra (speaker), Estrella

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After Estrella's father leaves, Petra is both unable to provide for the children and emotionally incapacitated by the new stress of her life. In one episode, Estrella makes up a game to distract the younger children from their hunger, but Petra, overwhelmed by the noise they make, emerges from the bathroom and yells at them. Estrella reprimands her mother for frightening the children and, to cheer them up, does a funny dance with an empty box of Quaker Oats she finds in the pantry.

This passage shows a transfer of responsibility from Petra to Estrella; although the young girl is coming of age in the novel's present action, she's already had to act like an adult for years. It's also interesting that while Petra's husband is completely unwilling to aid his wife in times of need, Estrella instinctively steps into this role, showing her belief that a woman can't and shouldn't have to bear the difficulties of motherhood alone; in this novel, the most meaningful domestic partnerships are not between spouses but between female relatives. Estrella's use of the Quaker Oats can is especially meaningful: the brand image is supposed to signal comfort and abundance, but here it's a grotesque symbol of the family's poverty and hunger, something "full of empty." Throughout the novel, Viramontes will transform the conventional significance of consumer goods in order to bring attention to the people who can't access them.

❝ She lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Perfecto Flores

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When Petra becomes romantically involved with Perfecto, Estrella is initially suspicious of the new man in her family's life. She covertly inspects the tool chest he carries everywhere, confused by all the mysterious objects inside. Eventually Perfecto wins her over by teaching her how to use the tools until she knows the meaning of each one, including the pry bar. By learning to work with the tools, Estrella acquires a set of skills that allows her to interact with the world around her in an empowering way. Describing the tools as conferring "power" and "significance," she contrasts this meaningful work to the exploitative and devalued labor she performs in the field. Comparing it to learning to read, she implicitly hopes that this kind of work will help her find a place in the mainstream society she observes at school, from which field work excludes her. Moments like this argue that the value and satisfaction of hard work derives from the circumstances under which it's performed.

Ironically, Estrella will eventually use a crowbar to threaten the clinic nurse into returning Perfecto's money. In this moment, the tool does give her "power" over the nurse, but it's a kind of power that cements her exclusion from society, rather than facilitating her acceptance.

❝ You think 'cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something? Estrella asked, pushing up her sleeves. She lay on her stomach and dipped her bandana into the water. The cool water ran over her fingers and over the gravel like velvet.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Maxine Devridge

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After working in the fields all day, Estrella meets up with her friend Maxine to read one of Maxine's stolen comics. The girls lie down under a tree by a creek that has formed in an irrigation ditch; Estrella's description of the water running over her hands "like velvet" communicates the natural beauty of this tableau. At the same time, the rampant environmental degradation caused by commercial farming (and its repercussions to human health) are very evident in this scene: Estrella fears that she's poisoning herself and her future children just by drinking the water. In this sense, environmental beauty serves to heighten the tragic sense of environmental corruption. The disproportionate effect of pollution on poor communities is also evident here: while more privileged families can live far away from the fields where their produce is grown, Estrella has no choice but to carry out her work and even leisure activities in a fundamentally compromised environment.

Chapter Two Quotes

❝ Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips…Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and bread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Estrella is preparing grapes to be dried into raisins, a grueling process that involves picking bunches of grapes, hauling heavy baskets across the fields, and carefully pouring the fruit into prepared wooden frames. Already tired and dispirited, Estrella compares her work to the branded image that will ultimately appear on the raisin boxes in the supermarket. Implying that producing raisins is leisurely and even elegant work and that the people who do it are happy and healthy, these images actively suppress the narrative of Estrella's actual work. Her labor is devalued not just economically – through the meager compensation she receives – but psychologically – by the refusal of employers and consumers to acknowledge her contributions and thus grant her a place in society. This passage is one of the novel's most explicit uses of consumer goods to communicate Estrella's exclusion from her society.

❝ Don't run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them.

Related Characters: Petra (speaker), Estrella

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

One day after work, Estrella sits quietly at the edge of a local baseball diamond to watch a Little League game. This is a rare moment of peace and leisure for her, but it's disrupted by a border patrol van that rumbles by, throwing Estrella into confusion and forcing her to run home for safety. This sequence of events illustrates Estrella's economic and racial marginalization from society. There's a huge gulf between her and the Little League players (who are probably her age) because she has to work to support her family and can't even afford an education, much less extracurricular activities. Her feeling that she doesn't belong in society because of her poverty is compounded by the threat of deportation (specific to Latinx communities) that prevents her from being physically safe in America.

To calm her daughter, Petra references her work and her connection to the land. She reminds Estrella that no matter what the authorities think, her work is inherently valuable; moreover, it gives her a claim on the land, regardless of her legal status. While Petra's words are morally uplifting, her inability to actually protect Estrella from La Migra shows her lack of agency as a poor, Latina mother. Here, she hints that Estrella's legal documents are hidden under her icon of Jesus; but the icon's collapse at the end of the novel will represent the end of Petra's conviction that her earnest attempts to assimilate into her adopted country will

guarantee her children security in American society.

He thought first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints…black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blackness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone.

Related Characters: Alejo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

While Alejo is illicitly picking peaches after work, the company planes begin spraying pesticides over the orchards, and he gets caught in the poisonous mist. Unable to avoid inhaling the chemicals, he falls from the tree and blacks out. Up to this point, images of natural beauty have often coincided with sly references to environmental degradation (such as a biplane in the distance or a reference to birth defects). This drastic moment explicitly shows the real cost of maintaining the idyllic orchards and their constant supply of produce. Alejo imagines himself being literally destroyed, which implicitly points out that environmental destruction necessarily means the destruction of human bodies and communities as well.

Importantly, in this moment of crisis Alejo references tar pits, which he once studied in school. Both he and Estrella use this geological phenomenon to explain that their grueling work and appalling living conditions erode their sense of personal identity until it is totally compromised. Alejo's thoughts at this moment foreshadow the fact that, although he isn't killed by the pesticides now, his ensuing illness will eradicate his optimism and hopes for the future, two of his most prominent qualities at the outset of the novel.

Chapter Three Quotes

She envied the car, then envied the landlord of the car who could travel from one splat dot to another. She thought him a man who knew his neighbors well, who returned to the same bed, who could tell where the schools and where the stores were, and where the Nescafé jars in the stores were located…

Related Characters: Petra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback, Petra remembers a long-ago trip to the grocery store. This seemingly quotidian task requires her to walk miles in the hot afternoon with all her children in tow; on their way they have to cross a busy highway and Petra has to cajole the terrified Ricky and Arnulfo into running across. Arriving at the store, she sees a new, beautiful car pulling in as well. The ease with which the middle-class car owner can travel contrasts with Petra's difficult and dangerous journey on foot (as well as Perfecto's car, which is always on the verge of breaking down). In American literature, cars often symbolize the freedom and opportunity which (according to national myth) is available to everyone; Viramontes transforms them into representations of the vast gulf between economic classes, and the social factors that prevent people like Petra from climbing out of poverty.

It's also important that Petra describes the car owner as a man who knows "where the Nescafé jars" are. For Petra, who can only afford the most basic foods, access to consumer goods like Nescafé is synonymous with living in a permanent home and feeling at home in society. The characters' frequent references to consumer goods represent not their material desires but their exclusion from middle-class society and their inability to benefit from the products that their labor provides to other Americans.

She thought of the young girl that Alejo had told her about, the one girl they found in the La Brea Tar Pits. They found her in a few bones. No details of her life were left behind, no piece of cloth, no ring, no doll. A few bits of bone displayed somewhere under a glass case and nothing else.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Alejo

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

When Estrella finally convinces Perfecto that Alejo must see a doctor, the whole family piles into the battered station wagon – which gets stuck in the mud almost as soon as they begin to drive. Departing from conventional symbolism, the car represents the family's lack of physical and social mobility. Since Petra is weak from pregnancy and Perfecto is old and exhausted, Estrella has to dig the car out of the mud alone. The grueling task makes her compare herself to a prehistoric girl falling into the tar pits; her plaintive comment that "no details of her life were left behind" communicates her feeling that not only her body but her existential identity is being eroded by the constant crises her family faces. She's emerging as an adult more than ever before, but she's also sacrificing her sense of self to do so. Like Petra's earlier expression of envy that her husband was able to leave the family so easily, this moment shows Estrella chafing against the pressure that her familial obligations impose. In this sense, it pushes back against the idea that women are somehow suited to assuming responsibility for those around them.

Chapter Four Quotes

❝ The cotton balls in the jar looked too white, like imitation cotton to Petra. She noticed a scale near the desk much like the one used for measuring the weight of picked cotton. The scale reminded her how she'd wet the cotton or hid handsized rocks in the middle of her sack so that the scale tipped in her favor when the cotton was weighed. The scale predicted what she would be able to eat, the measurement of her work…

Related Characters: Petra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

While they're waiting to be treated at the clinic, Petra surveys the medical paraphernalia all around her. From her years working as a harvester, she's intimately familiar with raw cotton; yet when it's cleaned and repackaged as a consumer good, it seems almost insidiously fake to her. This small incident alludes to Petra's broader alienation from the society around her, even though her work makes that society function. For many Americans (like the nurse she'll soon encounter), consumer goods are positive representations of the relatively high quality of life available to middle-class Americans. Yet Petra's reference to the daily stress of picking enough cotton to put food on the table is a reminder that the same economic system that facilitates middle-class ease keeps other Americans trapped in poverty.

❝ But the tire resisted, Alejo's body resisted, and she did not want to think what she was thinking now: God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself…All she wanted was to find a deep, dark quiet space like the barn to cry. That was due her. She deserved it.

00010

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Alejo

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

When the nurse finally appears and agrees to examine Alejo, Estrella's responsibilities are not ended; she has to translate for Petra and Perfecto and help her friend, who is weaker than ever, to the table. When the family set out for the clinic, Estrella was optimistic about the prospects of getting help for Alejo, but now she's realizing that the whole excursion is probably futile. Feeling that her effort is pointless, Estrella is beginning to acquire her mother's fatalistic attitude towards the future; but while Petra is comforted by her religious faith (represented by her devotion to the Jesucristo icon), Estrella's comment that "God was mean and did not care" indicates a profound pessimism that differentiates her from Petra.

Instead of relying on God, Estrella wants to retreat to the barn in order to collect herself. This passage builds on earlier moments in which the barn is compared to a "cathedral"; the calm, solitude, and contemplation which the barn has represented for Estrella now emerges as a replacement for religion and a consolation for loss of faith. This is both an affirmation of the importance of personal identity for Estrella and a moment of serious disillusionment with the institutions in which she has previously – though grudgingly – trusted.

Even the many things on the nurse's desk implied fakery; the pictures of her smiling boys (Who did they think they were, smiling so boldly at the camera?), the porcelain statue of a calico kitten with a little stethoscope, wearing a folded white cap with a red cross between its too cute perky little ears…

The clinic visit is the family's only interaction with middle-class America in the book; the nurse is the only character who isn't a laborer, and the clinic is one of the few real buildings that the family enters. In this context, Petra's unease represents her total alienation from that society; the fact that ordinary accessories of middle-class life, like desk ornaments and grinning photos, are so upsetting to her emphasizes the extent to which she lives outside this society. However, it's important that rather than accepting her exclusion, Petra pushes back. The reality of field work is often erased and ignored by the larger society, but Petra insists that her grim reality is just as important – even more real – than this seemingly normal scene. Even though this moment underlines her poverty, it's also an important reclamation of her own narrative.

10100

Related Characters: Petra (speaker), The Nurse

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Shut out from Alejo's examination because of her inability to speak English, Petra looks around the clinic with increasing disgust; everything she sees increases her mistrust of the nurse. Her anger at the cutesy kitten statue illuminates the larger absurdity of the clinic visit, during which the nurse is mostly concerned with filling out forms even though her patients are clearly in the midst of a crisis.

— The clinic visit is fifteen dollars, but I'll charge you only ten because…she paused and glanced at Estrella, then added, because I know times are hard these days. She removed her black patent leather purse from the bottom drawer and placed it on the desk beside the phone. Estrella stared at the nurse an extra second. How easily she put herself in a position to judge.

10100

Related Characters: Estrella, The Nurse (speaker)

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

After examining Alejo, the nurse is unable to come to any real conclusions, simply telling the family what they already know: that the teenager is sick and needs to go to the hospital. It seems absurd to Estrella that they're being charged any money for this visit, much less fifteen dollars; meanwhile, the nurse feels that she's doing them a favor by lowering the price. In this moment the nurse has a highly inflated opinion of the value of her work, which contrasts with the constant devaluation of Estrella and her family's work throughout the novel.

Moreover, this passage points out the fundamental disconnect between Estrella, the nurse, and the middle class which she represents. The nurse thinks that she's being charitable, but as Estrella points out, she doesn't know enough about the family or their struggles to relate to them in any positive way. It's novels like this, bringing hitherto unacknowledged narratives to light, that can shrink this gap in social understanding.

The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map.

In this passage, Estrella is standing outside the clinic, wondering what to do next. Despite the nurse's "generosity" in undercharging them, the fee has completely eaten up their limited funds, and they have no money to take Alejo to the hospital or get home. Interacting with the nurse has also made Estrella feel needy and indebted, but when she reframes the issue in terms of the contributions to society that she and her family have made their entire lives, it seems that it's really the nurse (and the middle-class society she represents) who is indebted to Estrella. Here, Estrella emphatically acknowledges the value of her own work while realizing that her society will not voluntarily do the same; this is thus a moment of profound empowerment and disillusion. In a few minutes Estrella will use violence to make the nurse acknowledge her, ending her dream of achieving recognition and agency in society through meaningful and "legitimate" labor.

10100

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), The Nurse

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 148

She did not feel like herself holding the money. She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money.

After the disastrous clinic visit, Estrella stands in the parking lot wondering what to do next. Throughout the visit Perfecto and Petra have become more and more passive, and their complete absence from her deliberations now shows that she's truly become the head of the family. Ultimately she threatens the nurse with Perfecto's crowbar in order to get the money back, taking responsibility for her family even when she has to act in ways she finds morally distasteful. This moment is perhaps the most representative of Estrella's coming of age, but it presents that process not as a positive development of adult character but a traumatic fracturing of identity. In order to care for her family, Estrella has to sacrifice her sense of her own goodness. This passage builds off earlier moments in which Estrella remarks that caring for her family erodes her sense of self – for example, when she envisioned herself sinking into the tar pits while digging the car out of the mud. Ultimately, it completes the novel's argument that labor conditions and social exclusion warp the process of growing up for many Latino young people, rendering it an experience of profound loss.

10010

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), The Nurse

Page Number: 150

He had given this country his all, and in this land that had used his bones for kindling, in this land that had never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank you, this young woman who could be his granddaughter had said the words with such honest gratitude…

After confronting the nurse and leaving the clinic, Estrella and her family drive to the nearest hospital, where Estrella lifts Alejo out of the car and prepares to shepherd her in. Looking back, she thanks Perfecto sincerely, acknowledging the effort and risk he's incurred in order to get here. Perfecto's comment that America has "never once said thank you" in all the time he's worked here echoes Estrella's epiphany outside the clinic, when she recognized both how essential her work is to keeping American society afloat and how unlikely her society is to acknowledge that fact. Here, Perfecto simultaneously enjoys a moment of sincere connection in a relationship that is often prickly and contrasts that connection to the callousness with which he's treated by the outside world. For both Perfecto and Estrella, realizing one's own worth goes hand in hand with renewed sadness at the experience of social indifference.

10110

Related Characters: Perfecto Flores (speaker), Estrella

Page Number: 155

The twins nuzzled under her arms. Soon, they were on the main boulevard again and the twins slowly fell into the snowlike quiet, shielded and warm and amazed that their big sister had the magic and the power in her hands to split glass in two.

After leaving Alejo in the hospital waiting room, Estrella sadly returns to the station wagon, but when she reaches the automatic doors, she makes a show of walking through them in order to amuse Cookie and Perla. Both girls are deeply impressed and fight to sit next to her on the way home. On a basic level, the fact that the girls have never seen an automatic door (a fairly ubiquitous item) underscores the family's poverty and exclusion from basic aspects of public life. It's also interesting that the twins derive so much security from Estrella's trick and invest their sister with such sweeping powers. The safety they feel underscores Estrella's actual powerlessness and the danger the family faces more than ever before. By leaving Alejo in the hospital, Estrella has finally acknowledged that she lacks the power to save him or devise a better solution; moreover, by threatening the nurse in order to get Perfecto's money back, she's potentially exposed herself to criminal prosecution. While the twins' behavior creates a touching picture of family unity, it's disturbingly clear that the safety they feel is entirely imaginary.

00010

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker), Perla, Cookie

Page Number: 156

Chapter Five Quotes

The head of Jesucristo broke from His neck and when His eyes stared up at her like pools of dark ominous water, she felt a wave of anger swelling against her chest.

Related Characters: Petra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

By the time the family leaves Alejo at the hospital and returns to the bungalow, Petra is completely exhausted. She feels sick from her pregnancy and deeply worried about Perfecto's strange attitude, rightly suspecting that he wants to leave the family. After lighting some candles in front of her Jesucristo icon, she looks through an envelope of documents – from birth and baptism certificates to her own marriage license – that she keeps hidden under the icon, finally telling the reader what she means when she says "under the feet of Jesus." Even though Petra is often passive and pessimistic, her actions show her persistent faith in the state (if she plays by the rules and makes sure her children have the right documents, society will respect them) and religion (praying to the icon will lead to good results). However, when she gets up, she knocks over the icon, which breaks. The decapitated, powerless icon shows Petra that she can't place any trust in external insitutions, and her "swelling" anger at it represents her profound loss of faith. Her experience of disillusionment mirrors Estrella's feelings as she copes with her inability to protect Alejo. For both mother and daughter, the novel ends on a note of isolation from any kind of larger protective force.

Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed.

Related Characters: Estrella (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Feeling upset and stifled inside the bungalow after leaving Alejo at the hospital, Estrella impulsively runs to the barn, climbs up to the loft, and forces open the trap door to the roof. Looking out onto the beautiful night, she experiences a moment of strange calm. The novel's final passage is highly enigmatic, both investing Estrella with power and questioning its extent at the same time. The barn has always symbolized Estrella's inner life, which she both tries to cultivate and feels she has to sacrifice for her family's well-being. Now, standing on the roof "like an angel" and feeling that her heart is "powerful," Estrella seems to feel that the one thing she has salvaged from this crisis is her personal identity, which remains undaunted. At the same time, Viramontes's use of religious language here – calling Estrella an "angel" and her heart a cathedral's "bell" – recalls Petra's crisis of faith in the previous passage. Using these religious elements to describe Estrella suggests that, like her mother, she's putting faith in something – her own

autonomy – that will prove all too fallible. At the end of the novel, not only the family's future but Estrella's self-conception are fundamentally in doubt.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER ONE

Estrella, a thirteen-year-old girl, is sitting in the backseat of Chevy station wagon, crammed alongside seven of her family members. She sees a large barn come into view and wonders if this is what they've been heading towards all along. Sunlight is coming through the clouds, and many kinds of fruit trees are swaying in the wind. Estrella's mother, Petra, indicates that Perfecto, who is driving, should turn the car towards the barn.

While cars are often positive symbols of power and mobility in American literature, Estrella and her family are clearly anxious to exit the Chevy and find a place where they can stay. From the outset, Viramontes transforms the car into a symbol of their poverty and shows that they are excluded from conventional American narratives.

Everyone in the car is silent, assessing the barn and the weather outside. Their ability to work depends on so many things: "the car running, the health, the conditions of the road…and weather"; because of this, the family can "depend on nothing." To Estrella, Perfecto seems uncertain.

That everyone in the car – even the children – is thinking about work demonstrates that the effort and stress of migrant labor pervades every aspect of family life. Estrella's ability to recognize Perfecto's uncertainty shows that, although she's a child, she already understands her parents' fallibility.

From a nearby peach tree, Alejo sees the car coming and warns his cousin, Gumecindo, to be quiet. He's been taking advantage of the sunset to pick peaches and hand them to Gumecindo, who acts as lookout on the ground. They've been having a playful argument about an acquaintance named Plato; Gumecindo thinks the name means "plate" in "gringo Spanish," and Alejo has just informed him otherwise. Now, Alejo watches the car doors open as wasps buzz around his face, their legs dangling "like golden threads."

From the start of the novel, Alejo is an instructor – he tells Gumecindo about Plato and later shares his love of geology with Estrella. This evidence of his curiosity and intellectual potential implicitly critiques the fact that he's not in school but rather stealing fruit to feed his family. The lush descriptions of the wasps signal the characters' – and the author's – respect for the natural world.

Alejo sees an old man carefully climb out of the car; he looks towards the peach trees but doesn't see Alejo. He gets back in the car and continues driving towards the barn. Inside the car, Estrella's younger brother Ricky wakes up and asks when they will arrive. No one answers him, but Petra confirms to Perfecto that this is the place she's been looking for.

Ricky's unanswered question points to a larger truth – that the family has no settled home, and will never arrive at any particular place for good. Throughout the novel, ordinary actions will emphasize the family's exclusion from mainstream American society.

When they reach a small, decrepit bungalow situated close to the barn, Petra announces that they've arrived. Estrella's four younger siblings burst out of the car. Estrella picks up a plastic doll that has fallen on the ground and asks her if she's all right; then she shakes the doll's head "no." Running, Estrella follows her brothers, Ricky and Arnulfo, into the fields.

As the oldest and most mature child, Estrella is distinct from her seemingly carefree younger siblings, yet her articulation of her own feelings and uncertainty through the doll also reminds the reader how young she really is.

In her rubber sandals, Petra looks around for some horsetail weed, which is "just as good" for cleaning the cooking pit as steel wool. As she pokes the ashes of the cooking pit, she imagines the fragrance of tortillas and other dishes cooked by previous residents rising up. Behind her, Perfecto stomps on a scorpion. He enters the shack and examines the inside, looking for a place to set up Petra's altarpiece. On the floor is a dead bird; knowing that this will upset Petra, he quickly throws it out the window.

Rather than relying on consumer goods – like steel wool – Petra has to find what she needs in the land around her. This is a testament to her ability to live within nature, rather than exploiting it for her needs. Yet it's also a reminder that she can't afford even the most basic supermarket products.

As she's extricating her broom from the car, Petra sees Estrella leaping around in the grass and thinks about the varicose veins in her own legs. She yells at the children to watch out for scorpions, but they don't listen to her. Listening to "the tease of words and leaves," Estrella runs towards the abandoned barn. She's just turned thirteen, and both she and Petra are anxious about this "unlucky" number.

As Petra watches Estrella come of age, she often thinks about her own aging and careworn body. This is indicative of how closely mother and daughter identify with each other. It's also shows the immense physical toll that fieldwork takes – Petra is barely twenty years older than her daughter, but after years of labor she's lost her health and vigor.

At the entrance to the barn, which is like a "cathedral," Estrella finds her twin sisters Cookie and Perla. Bravely, Estrella volunteers to enter first. The barn seems "so strangely vacant," and a chain hangs from the ceiling. Suddenly, the door swings open and startles all the birds living in the barn. The girls scream.

Here and elsewhere Estrella compares the barn to a church. While Petra turns to prayers and icons in times of trouble, Estrella finds the same solace in the solitude of the barn.

In the peach orchard, Alejo reassures his cousin that the strange noise is just cats fighting. Gumecindo is frightened and pleads with Alejo to leave; he thinks the wailing comes from La Llorona, a legendary ghost. As they walk, Alejo notices that Gumecindo's shadow keeps "smashing" against the trees. He tells Gumecindo that they need to hit a few more trees in order to have enough fruit to sell.

Even though the image of two boys walking through the trees seems idyllic, the violent illusion Alejo sees is a reminder of the danger they face if they're caught in the orchard, as well as the environmental degradation that inevitably accompanies commercial farming.

In a flashback, Estrella thinks back to her "real father." Her strongest memory of him is a moment when he peeled an orange for her during a rest stop on a long drive north to look for work. In the memory, they've stopped in the middle of an orange grove, and since there's no foreman around, Petra picks some fruit. Estrella's father takes off the peel in one piece, "as if it meant something to him to peel the orange from stem to navel."

Throughout the novel, acts of physical labor – even the trivial task of peeling an orange – emerge as moments of dignity and empowerment. Although looking for work is an uncertain and stressful process, Estrella derives comfort and satisfaction from the work of her father's hands.

At the cooking pit, Petra is thinking about the past as well. Even when her marriage was beginning to dissolve, the women in the labor camp advised her not to leave her husband. He might track her and the children down and kill her in revenge, they said. Even if he didn't, Petra would never find someone else to provide for her and five children.

The women's advice shows society's drastically different expectations for mothers and fathers: mothers are responsible for their children's welfare, even if it means staying in a bad marriage, while fathers are expected to put their own desires first and allowed to be absent or even violent.

In the end, Estrella's father leaves the family to work in Mexico and soon disappears – just as they've managed to rent a real apartment for the first time. In Estrella's confused memories of that period, her father often calls, promising to return soon and asking for money. As the bills pile up, Petra prays constantly and the twins begin to call Estrella "mama." No job that Petra finds pays enough to provide the family with food.

Petra's inability to provide for her family alone is not a sign of personal weakness but a reflection of the social obstacles she faces – no matter how much she works, women don't get paid enough to support several children. Lack of paternal involvement and social resources makes motherhood an impossible and oppressive task.

After some time, they pack up their belongings in garbage bags and move to an even smaller apartment. Estrella chalks up her father's lack of letters to his ignorance of their change of address. Estrella knows that Petra often thinks of him, but she'll never know if he remembers his family in the same wistful way.

The father's ability to forget about his family contrasts with the responsibility ingrained in Estrella and Petra, even when they chafe against the restrictions it imposes.

Now, Perfecto stands at the barn door and chastises Estrella for running inside. The walls are unsteady and they could have been killed, he says. He orders the children to go help Petra, and Estrella resents his commanding tone. She catches up with her brothers and punches Ricky. She remarks grumpily that Perfecto isn't her real father.

Estrella's refusal to accept Perfecto is a sign of the independent spirit and sense of personal agency she's developing – qualities that will be assailed by various crises throughout the novel.

Estrella remembers that when her family lived in an apartment, it looked out onto a freeway interchange. In the memory, Petra worries that the road is "a car wreck waiting to happen." She looks out the window while her husband ties up his new shoelaces. She knows it's only a matter of time until he leaves, and she finds herself holding her breath as she watches the cars spill across the road like "beads" from a "broken necklace."

For Petra, cars are not symbols of power or progress but harbingers of doom. It's also important that while she endures the inconvenience of living near the freeway, she doesn't benefit from it in any way. Moments like this show how migrant laborers are shut out from even the most basic aspects of American public life.

Petra is almost envious that her husband has the "spine" to leave the family, especially when she hears fantastic rumors about his whereabouts – that he's selling peanuts in another city or walking down the streets with a glamorous woman in high heels. While Petra lies to her children about his whereabouts, he's behaving "as if his life belonged to no one but him."

While Petra sacrifices her personal desires for her children, her husband sacrifices their welfare in order to forge his own identity. In this sense, Petra's domestic life mirrors the broader plight of migrant workers who make great sacrifices to provide for a society that doesn't respect or value them.

Overwhelmed after her husband's departure, Petra spends hours at the window fingering her rosary beads, oblivious to the domestic chaos of the apartment and the daily rituals occurring in the street beneath her. Petra bites her thumb until she draws blood. She can hear the twins banging on buckets, a game Estrella has invented to distract them from hunger. When the noise becomes too cacophonous, Petra bursts into the kitchen and screams at them to stop. Frightened, the young children hide under the bed. Estrella reprimands Petra for her outburst.

Viramontes often praises mothers and emphasizes the everyday heroism that raising a child requires. However, she's careful not to romanticize motherhood, and in moments like this shows how extreme poverty makes motherhood an impossible and unwanted task. Meanwhile, by taking charge of the situation Estrella establishes herself as her mother's new partner, who will mature quickly and take on the responsibilities abandoned by her father.

There's nothing in the pantry except a can of Raid and an empty box of Quaker Oats. Estrella takes the box, with its cheerful mascot, and dances it in front of the twins, doing a funny routine until they stop crying. Petra runs downstairs and stands at the edge of the freeway. Her children are hungry, and she doesn't know what to do. She remembers her own father, who worked carrying sixty-pound bags of cement, and thinks about Estrella "trying to feed the children with noise."

Well-known throughout America, the ubiquitous image of the Quaker Oats man is supposed to represent the comfort and security of home, but here it serves to emphasize Petra's helplessness and desperation as she tries to provide for the children. Viramontes inverts the conventional symbolism of consumer goods, making them signs of poverty and social injustice.

In the present, Alejo and Gumecindo are sneaking past the barn when they see a small child playing near it. Gumecindo wants to leave, but Alejo insists they stop and see if the child is alright. Coming closer, they see an unfamiliar boy with a harelip; the boy glares at a space somewhere above Alejo's head. Gumecindo is deeply uneasy. For some time the boy plays in the dirt, but then he falls and cuts himself on broken glass; he starts crying silently, and to Alejo even the hole in his shirt looks like a "speechless mouth" crying. To distract the boy, Alejo uses his hands to make shadow animals on the barn wall. Fascinated, the boy forgets about his injuries and begins chasing the illusions.

The "harelip boy" is an enigmatic character who appears occasionally to Estrella and Alejo but whose origins remain unknown; he could be either a wandering child or a figment of the teenagers' imagination. His unprotected state and inability to speak for himself may represent the plight of disenfranchised and marginalized migrant workers; moreover, since Petra will later associate harelips with pesticide contamination, his disability may be a comment on the physical toll commercial farming takes on migrant bodies.

During her marriage, Petra spikes her husband's coffee with menstrual blood, but even that doesn't keep him from leaving. As he finishes tying his shoes he promises to be back by the end of the week, but Petra has a bad feeling. She summons Estrella to say goodbye "for now," and the little girl pleads with Petra to hide his shoes so he can't leave.

Throughout the novel Petra places great store by religion and folk rituals, even though, as in this moment, they usually fail her. Estrella's plaintive comment makes clear that, even at her young age, she understands her precarious and unprotected situation.

When Estrella first meets Perfecto, she opens the red tool chest he carries everywhere. She can't make head or tail of the jumbled tools inside, which are "as confusing and foreign as the alphabet." For days Estrella is enraged, as she hates the feeling that people are keeping information from her. It's just like the schools that she occasionally attends – no matter how much she wants to learn, the teachers are more interested in checking her hair for lice. She sits at the back of the classroom, in seats reserved for migrant children who are just passing through.

For Estrella, learning to use the tools is a highly empowering process, giving her a constructive way to interact with the world around her. While it's good that she's acquiring these skills, this passage also points out that due to the prejudice and indifference of educators she's unable to access the education to which she's entitled or derive any real empowerment from school.

Once, a teacher whose face looks like a Kleenex asks "how come her mama never gave her a bath." Estrella has always taken pride in the tight braids into which Petra ties her hair every morning; she's never realized that she's "dirty." For the first time, she sees how words can be "as excruciating as rusted nails."

The teacher is quick to classify Petra as a "bad" mother, but it's clear that she's doing the best she can in harsh circumstances. Judging impoverished mothers on criteria that are impossible to fulfill does nothing to improve child welfare and simply perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

Even though his tools don't make sense at first, Perfecto stays with the family a long time and begins to share his extensive knowledge with Estrella. He explains how to use a chisel and hammer to remove a door, and what to do if the hinge pins are stuck. Soon, Estrella knows the names of all the tools and what to do with them. When she lifts up a pry bar, she feels the "power of function" and the "significance it awarded her." She realizes how important it is to know things, and she begins to learn to read.

When Estrella masters the use of Perfecto's tools, she begins to understand the dignity of work and the satisfaction she can derive from it. However, her simultaneous insistence on learning to read shows her cognizance that society doesn't value manual labor the way she does. In order to wield "power" in the world around her, she'll need a wider variety of skills.

Now, Perfecto asks Estrella to bring him some nails. He's plugging mouse holes in the bungalow. He says that her exploits are making him old, and she reminds him that he's not her father. Still, she helps him up from the floor; together they nail up a sheet to divide the room into sleeping quarters.

In many ways, Perfecto is a more responsible father figure than Estrella's "real" father. However, her hostility towards him shows her reluctance to trust men to uphold their obligations.

Once, Estrella got into a fistfight to prove that Perfecto wasn't her father. During one stay in a labor camp, Estrella meets a girl her age, Maxine Devridge. She comes from a white family infamous for bad behavior; many of her relatives are in jail, and all the other migrants pitch their tents far away from them. As Estrella is walking home one day, Maxine asks her if she "talks 'merican" and beckons her to the family's shack. She's sitting on a mattress covered in urine stains, and her dress is hiked between her legs.

Worn down by the pressures of migrant life, the Devridges are indifferent to their terrible living quarters and bad reputation; in comparison to Maxine, Estrella is lucky to belong to parents who uphold their dignity and keep their children clean and well-cared for. Despite this, it's Estrella who has to "prove" her American nationality by speaking English, while Maxine, who is white, takes this privilege for granted and assumes that others will as well.

In her hand, Maxine holds a comic, which she now shows to Estrella. It's titled *Millie the Model*, and there's a beautiful blond woman crying on the cover. Estrella realizes that Maxine wants her to read the comic aloud and grabs it from her. She's never been allowed to take a book home from school, and the only book she has at home is a religious pamphlet. Estrella opens the comic but is most struck by the advertisements peddling laundry detergent, premade dinners, and sunscreen. Estrella interprets the comic for Maxine, and the other girl says that if she keeps coming over, they can read other comics her brothers have stolen.

The comics allow Maxine and Estrella to peek into a society from which they are completely excluded. Both the elegant, clean women in the pages and the advertisements for consumer goods are totally alien to the girls' hardscrabble existence. Although it's their poorly-paid work that makes the production of these goods possible, they don't get to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Every day after work, Estrella and Maxine meet up at the tree by the irrigation ditch, which forms a small stream. Both girls are exhausted, and the smell of tomatoes clings to their bodies. Although they're thirsty, neither drinks from the stream, because they know that pesticides spill into the water. Estrella thoughtfully asks Maxine if she thinks they'll give birth to children with no mouths. To cool down, they splash water on their faces, careful not to ingest it.

Describing the trees and the stream, Viramontes evokes the beauty of the natural world, but she immediately disrupts this image by mentioning pesticide contamination, which imperils both the environment and public health. The contrast creates an atmosphere of danger and unease which hovers over the girls' health and their friendship.

The two girls are reading *Millie the Model* and teasing each other about the handsome hero when the smell of rotting flesh reaches them. Looking into the ditch, they see a dog carcass floating along. The corpse gets stuck on a grate. To escape the smell, Estrella and Maxine have to leave their hideaway.

The polluted, dangerous environment in which the girls live contrasts starkly with the trivial problems addressed in the comic. Moments like this show how invisible the plight of migrant workers is to the wider society.

Idly teasing Estrella, Maxine asks why her father is so old. Estrella replies tersely that Perfecto isn't her father, and Maxine teases her for letting an old man "fuck your ma." Angrily, Estrella insists that they're not having sex; when Maxine laughs at her, Estrella pulls her hair and two girls fight viciously until Maxine's mother pulls them apart. In the aftermath of the fight, the foreman tells Perfecto and Petra that they should leave the camp before the Devridges take their revenge. Perfecto doesn't scold Estrella or ask what the fight was about. Everyone packs up their meager belongings and Petra dismantles the tarp and poles that constitute the family's home.

Estrella's ignorance of her mother's love life is one of her few moments of childlike naiveté, and the drastic outcome shows how quickly and painfully she's ushered out of childhood and into adult knowledge. Although both girls are culpable in the fistfight, only the Latino family is displaced from the camp; the discriminatory treatment they receive shows that, although fieldwork is oppressive to migrants of all races, non-white workers are especially vulnerable to displacement and exploitation.

On their way out of the camp, Estrella looks out the car window at the rows where she and Maxine had once picked tomatoes and eaten them after wiping off the pesticides. She sees the oak tree where they retreated to read comics. She even sees Maxine herself looking after the car as it leaves forever.

Even though they've ended their friendship on a fight, both girls are clearly repentant. The harsh conditions of migrant life, and the racial discrimination that accompanies it, have destroyed a positive and empowering childhood relationship.

By this time in the present, Gumecindo is desperate to go home, especially since he knows they could be fired for being in the orchard now. But Alejo is climbing a tree in order to watch a strange girl (Estrella) washing herself and a watermelon at the irrigation ditch. He and Gumecindo have gathered fifteen sacks of peaches, which they'll sell at the weekend market in order to make extra money. While Gumecindo begs to leave, Alejo watches the girl take her dress off and step into the water, where the fruit is floating. Gracefully, she swims to the middle of the ditch and retrieves the fruit. Lost in reverie, Alejo falls out of the tree.

Both Alejo and Estrella are in the process of harvesting and washing fruit – but right now, they're doing this for themselves and their families, not at the behest of a large corporation. Lyrical moments like this emphasize the beauty of working closely with the land; the novel's critique lies not with fieldwork itself but the social conditions that keep fieldworkers trapped in poverty.

Petra stokes the fire, singing to herself. Estrella returns from the stream, cradling the watermelon like a baby; this image makes Petra feels sad, even though she knows that Petra will inevitably grow older and already has to be mature for her "safety." Estrella tells her mother to come to bed, but Petra wants to wait up for Perfecto, who has gone to the local store. In the meantime, she makes Estrella draw a circle in the dirt around the house, which she believes will protect them against scorpions.

Petra views Estrella's approaching adolescence with grim trepidation. In her eyes, growing up can lead to nothing but a repetition of her mother's difficult life. Petra's passivity and pessimism about the future contrast with Estrella's current sense of agency and possibility, but by the end of the novel, her views will become more closely aligned with her mother's.

Walking towards the bungalow, Alejo sees a biplane dusting the crops with pesticides. Inside, Ricky and Arnulfo watch the plane as well; Ricky dreams of flying the planes when he grows up. Outside, Estrella is boiling the day's drinking water when she sees a strange boy – Alejo – approaching. He nervously introduces himself and presents Petra with a sack of peaches. Petra gives him some pinto beans to bring to his own mother, but Alejo explains that his mother is dead; he lives with his grandmother in Texas, and has only come to work here for the summer.

To the young boys, the biplane is exciting and admirable, but it's actually covering the fields with chemicals that will jeopardize their health. Throughout the novel, Viramontes creates images that are both evocative and disturbing in order to highlight the simultaneous bounty and destruction of the environment.

Estrella warns Alejo not to get caught picking fruit, and Petra remarks darkly that given their pay, the bosses are lucky they don't burn the orchards. Estrella tells her not to talk tough unless she means it; she offers her a bite of a peach. Alejo walks away from the cabin and thinks about Estrella's face, seeing within it "the woman who swam in the magnetic presence of the full moon."

Estrella and Petra's affectionate exchange emphasizes their closeness, a bond that will endure the many ensuing crises of the novel. Alejo is attracted to Estrella specifically but also allured by the familial closeness that she embodies and which he currently lacks.

CHAPTER TWO

In the fields, Estrella carefully harvests a bunch of grapes, lets them fall into a basket, and pours them into a carefully-prepared wooden frame which will dry them into raisins. Estrella thinks about the raisin boxes in the supermarket, which show a woman "wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips." This woman can't know anything about the backbreaking work Estrella is doing now, or the sun that is stinging her eyes. In the field conditions, her beautiful outfit would be useless.

Estrella's work is grueling, absorbing all her focus and energy, yet her meager wages and the perception of field labor promoted by corporations completely ignores this reality. Throughout the novel, the omnipresence of work in Estrella's life will contrast with the invisibility of that work in the wider society.

In his row, Alejo accidentally cuts himself and stops to suck on his wound. In the distance he hears a toddler crying and looking for his mother; it's a common scene throughout the day. He thinks of his own grandmother, who has worked so many different jobs in order to keep him in school. Estrella has accompanied her mother to the fields since she was four. Even while hugely pregnant, Petra hauled enormous sacks of cotton which grew "like the swelling child within her."

The crying toddler is a reminder that Alejo himself – unaccustomed to fieldwork and struggling – is also barely more than a child. In this passage, several vulnerable groups – from children to the elderly to pregnant women – are forced to work dangerous jobs for low pay because they lack social rights and protections.

At lunch, Alejo eats the burrito he's packed while watching Estrella drink water under the shade of a vine. All morning he's been struggling to arrange the frames for the grapes, a finicky task. His grandmother has promised him that this job is only temporary, and he gets himself through the day by imagining his first day of high school. He wants to go to college and study geology, which he loves because it roots him in the history of the earth and keeps him from feeling lost.

Alejo loves geology because it gives him a sense of belonging – exactly the thing he lacks in a society that marginalizes him and devalues his work. It's notable that although geology gives him comfort and security, it's through the geological phenomenon of tar pits that he'll later articulate his feelings of social exclusion and erasure.

When Estrella was little, she tried to stay awake in the fields but always ends up falling asleep on her mother's sack of cotton. She doesn't realize until much later how much weight this must have added to Petra's daily burden. Instead, she remembers these moments of sleepy proximity to her mother as happy and tranquil. In his own row, Alejo sees the young boy with the harelip from the night before. The boy ignores his greeting and walks past him down the row.

Estrella's memory emphasizes the tenderness and strength of her mother and the extreme difficulty of parenting without any access to social resources. It's interesting that Alejo sees the harelip boy – representative of the plight of migrant workers – just as he's feeling overwhelmed and oppressed by the day's work.

Looking sick and dehydrated, Ricky wanders up to Estrella and says he's feeling poorly – but all she can tell him to do is sit under the trees until it's time to go home. She looks at the flatbeds of grapes on which she's worked all day, and wants to cry when she reflects that she'll be doing this for the rest of her life. As she continues to work, her muscles feel like "barbed wire"; to soothe herself, she thinks about the cool dark barn, where she can sit and relax once she's home.

Estrella feels intensely responsible for her brother's welfare, but she's also powerless to protect him from the heat of the fields – much less keep him in school. Her sense of family obligations contrasts with her desire to cultivate her inner life, which she articulates by imagining the calm solitude of the barn.

Alejo imagines his grandmother bringing him a used copy of *Reader's Digest* and remembers rubbing her cold hands with Vaseline at night. He hopes that she's received the money he sent. When they hear the railroad bells, all the piscadores briefly stop working and think about the difficulties and small pleasures awaiting them after the workday. When the woman next to Alejo unties and rearranges her bandana, he realizes he's been working next to Estrella all along. She doesn't notice him.

Like Estrella, Alejo is also taking on familial responsibilities that should belong to adults. The image of the train moving purposefully towards a specific destination contrasts with the listening piscadores, who are trapped in the same routine day after day without gaining anything from their labor.

When Estrella glimpses her own shadow, she's shocked at how "hunched and spindly" it looks. For a minute, she thinks she sees another shadow looming over her, but when she stands up and calls out, she realizes it's another field worker. Embarrassed, she gives him a peach she's been saving for the walk home. When the trucks honk, the workers straighten up, collect errant children, and prepare to go home. Alejo catches sight of Estrella walking down the railroad track, away from the group.

The illusion created by Estrella's shadow is an unwelcome look into the future that awaits her if she continues to work in the fields. Viramontes often describes her young and healthy body with lyrical language, but these ominous moments qualify the youth and strength that characterize her right now. For Estrella, coming of age is a process of loss and decline.

Alone, Estrella walks to a nearby baseball diamond, where she watches a Little League game as the sun sets. Lots of parents are sitting in the stands with coolers of food, and she wishes she had her peach. She loves watching the baseball fly through the air and the applause that breaks out when someone scores a point.

For Estrella, this is a rare moment of leisure and ease, but she's actually peeking into the lives of more privileged children her own age, whose lives are characterized by leisure. This poignant moment epitomizes the distance between Estrella and the middle-class society whose lifestyle her work facilitates.

Suddenly, Estrella is confronted by bright headlights – she's worried that it's border patrol, and she can't remember "which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in." She doesn't know if the lights are meant for her or the players in the field. Suddenly, the entire game seems confusing and nightmarish. She grabs her knife and runs into the night.

Estrella's sudden sense of dislocation and uncertainty indicates that she doesn't feel a sense of belonging in either America or Mexico. By describing borders as trivial "wire mesh," the novel draws attention to the inherently constructed nature of national identity and critiques the discrimination Estrella suffers because of her complex heritage.

Petra is surprised to see Estrella approach the house at a run. Estrella opens Perfecto's tool chest, pulls out a pry bar, and says she's "gonna teach someone a lesson." Patiently, Petra says that La Migra is targeting everyone these days. She's in the midst of bathing Cookie and Perla, who are fighting each other and their mother. She has ground up yucca roots for soap, and the veins of her legs are standing out. Usually she eats garlic every day to sooth her veins, but they haven't been able to buy any lately.

Through her anger, Estrella expresses both her frustration with the circumstances of her life and her belief that she can change them. By contrast, Petra's patience indicates acceptance of her lot in life. Petra's devotion to the difficult task of bathing Cookie and Perla contrasts ironically with Estrella's memory of the teacher who dismissed her as "dirty."

Petra advises Estrella not to let the threat posed by La Migra affect her. She shouldn't be ashamed of "picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner," and if she ever gets stopped, she should tell them that her mother is here providing for her; she's not an orphan. Moreover, her birth certificate is "under the feet of Jesus." Estrella closes her eyes.

The constant threat of arrest and deportation strips away Estrella's sense of belonging in America – even though she was born there. Petra's cryptic words both refer to the icon in the bungalow and suggest that Estrella's fate is in the hands of God – human powers can't be trusted.

While waiting for Alejo near the trucks the next day, Gumecindo chats with another piscador, introducing himself. Impatient, the driver almost leaves without Alejo, and two of the men have to lift him into the truck bed as he runs. Estrella is sitting on the bench, cradling Arnulfo's sleepy head. When she nods hello at Alejo he tries to begin a conversation, saying how beautiful her name is. She explains that her father chose it, but admits that he's gone now, saying that "things just happen." When Alejo continues to ask questions, she becomes hostile and suspicious.

Although Alejo's crush on Estrella is the stuff of conventional teenage romance, it's obstructed by Estrella's ingrained suspicion of outsiders; at the same time, their feelings for each other quickly become intense due to the rarity of making connections in the midst of their difficult lives.

That night, Alejo jiggles the change in his pocket and holds a bottle of Coke. Estrella sits next to him on a corral fence, watching an eclipse. Other men are gathered around fires singing and drinking, and it reminds Estrella of the words in her grandmother's Christian pamphlet: "the Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire to show his love." She notices Alejo's gelled hair and his prominent Adam's apple.

For once, Estrella gets to enjoy a date like a normal teenager. Her description of the night in apocalyptic religious language creates a somewhat eerie atmosphere, however.

No other women are present tonight because of a superstition that being out during the eclipse will cause them to give birth to deformed children, like the harelipped boy sometimes visible in the moon. Petra is very angry at Estrella's determination to leave the house, but now the young girl shakes out her hair luxuriously as the moon gradually reappears. Alejo apologizes for making her angry earlier, but Estrella says it's not his fault. She shows Alejo how to blow on the mouth of the Coke bottle and produce an eerie sound. As she walks away, she thinks of her mother's warning, but is relieved to hear Alejo blowing notes until she's out of earshot.

Although this superstition may be fallacious, it is true that exposure to the poisoned environment of the farms leads to birth defects. Just as Estrella doesn't feel safe in America because of the constant threat of deportation, it's hard to feel at home in an environment that could be poisoning her future children.

After the next full day of work, Estrella wearily trudges to meet Perfecto behind the bungalow. She's too tired to jump over the fence as she normally does. In the distance a biplane is preparing to spray the fields, even though the bosses said they were doing this next week. Perfecto asks abruptly if Estrella can help him tear down the barn; they can make extra money by selling the material. Estrella hates the thought of using the barn until it's "all used up" and then destroying it, thinking that this is what will happen to her as well.

In this passage, Estrella identifies herself explicitly with the barn. This comparison firmly establishes the old building as the place where Estrella feels most calm and at home with herself, but also emphasizes the difficulty of cultivating a strong identity and inner life when society treats her as a commodity to be used and discarded.

Estrella tells Perfecto to get someone else to help. Perfecto says that someone once died in the barn, which is why no one comes there and why it needs to come down. Estrella says that "the harelip boy" comes all the time, but Perfecto thinks she's daydreaming.

Estrella's offhand comment and Perfecto's dismissal suggest that the harelip boy is actually a metaphorical representation of migrant workers as a whole, rather than a real character.

Alejo is high up in a peach tree when he sees the biplane overhead. Yelling for Gumecindo to run, he struggles down from the tree but gets caught in the white mist. He breathes in the poison and immediately starts choking; the pesticides spread through his body, causing burning pain and making him feel as though he might vomit. Alejo imagines himself disintegrating into the tar pits he once studied at school, his body gradually losing shape and leaving behind no trace. When he wakes up, bloody and bruised, he's looking into his cousin's worried face.

This visceral moment epitomizes the link between environmental degradation and human health. It's important that Alejo references the tar pits here, a metaphor Estrella will later use when she feels that her hard labor is futile. In this sense, Alejo's feeling of "disintegrating" reflects not just his physical pain but his existential dread of belonging to a society that treats him and his work as completely dispensable.

After Estrella leaves, Perfecto stays by the corral, thinking. He's becoming more and more preoccupied with returning to his hometown before he dies or forgets how to get there. Last night, he dreamed of waking up next to a young woman and making love to her; the dream, in which he recognized his first wife, Mercedes, seems more real than his actual life. He still feels guilty about having sex with Mercedes before their marriage; he's sure that this transgression led to the stillbirth of their first child. He's always been haunted by this death.

Perfecto's reverie gives rare insight into his life before he met Petra and became part of her family. His desire to return to his hometown reflects his desire for belonging and stability – things that, given his social circumstances, he can't actually achieve.

Alejo is battered and sick the next day, but with Gumecindo's help he boards the truck to go to work. Everyone stares at him and Estrella touches his forehead in concern. He doesn't reveal that he's been caught in the pesticide spray, and she tells him that he should be more careful not to fall out of the trees.

Even though Alejo has suffered life-threatening injuries, he still has to go to work the next day. His insistence to go reflects his desire to be an independent adult, but actually emphasizes his vulnerability to sickness and calamity.

Perfecto is beginning to think of his home all the time. He feels that "everything he did like eat and sleep and work and love was prohibited," and he wants to make things right before he dies. He knows he has to pull the barn down, so that he can give some money to the family before he leaves. He stabs the soil with his knife, letting it dull the blade as it does "his own life."

Perfecto is feeling trapped, both by religious strictures that make him ashamed of his relationships and by the grueling monotony of migrant life. However, if he extricates himself, he will sink Petra and the children even deeper into poverty and desperation.

It's so hot this week that two piscadores faint. At lunch, people huddle in the shade and comfort their sweaty children. Estrella sees a girl her own age nursing a baby. On the radio Estrella listens to people call in and make jokes about "mojados" (an offensive term for immigrants). The program is constantly interrupted by commercials.

Radio is supposed to be a form of entertainment accessible to all listeners, but the casual use of racial slurs on the air shows that it actively excludes minorities like Mexican Americans. This chance moment emphasizes Estrella's marginalization from the most basic aspects of American culture.

Estrella moves to some unclaimed shade under one of the trucks, carefully avoiding the dripping oil. Soon Alejo approaches and scoots under to join her. He explains to her that oil comes from tar pits, pools of of dead animal and plant matter that have accumulated under the sea for millions of years. While he talks, he holds her hand; Estrella is used to close contact with the bodies of her siblings, but this is something entirely different.

Estrella immediately compares the experience of holding hands with Alejo to contact with her siblings. While she usually thinks of herself entirely in relation to her family, blossoming romance with him gives her the opportunity to consider her individual identity.

Alejo says that once while he was picking peaches, he heard people screaming and it made him think of the prehistoric animals who got stuck in the tar pits and died. He says that in the La Brea tar pits they even found a human girl's bones. He unfolds Estrella's hand and kisses it gently. She touches his chin and cheek.

Alejo's observation builds on his earlier comparison of himself to a person sinking in the tar pits. Both he and Estrella repeatedly use this image to articulate the extent to which their work corrodes their bodies and identities.

In the afternoon Estrella wishes she could talk to Maxine; in her friend's absence she runs home to the quiet barn. She holds her hands up in the sunbeams coming from the ceiling and the safety pins on her cuffs sparkle. Again, she examines the large hanging chain, wondering if it's part of some grain storage mechanism. When she tries to yank it, her hands are covered with red rust.

Estrella's wish shows how deprived she is of friends or connections outside her family. However, the barn gives her the space for introspection – even joy – that she often lacks amid her busy and stressful family life.

CHAPTER THREE

As the days pass and Alejo's condition worsens, one of the other piscadores diagnoses him with "daño of the fields," a very serious illness. Gumecindo consults with Perfecto and Petra; it's time for them to take the bus back to Texas, but Alejo can't even move. Gumecindo is worried about Alejo. He says he always knew something would go wrong, but he also clearly wants to go home himself. His anxiety to leave resonates with Perfecto.

The fact that Alejo's illness is specifically connected – at least in common parlance – to the fields suggests that it's not just the pesticides making him sick but the entire system of exploitative labor in which he lives. As Gumecindo relinquishes responsibility for his cousin, Estrella will care for him – again emphasizing the tendency of women to take on obligations that men can't or won't fulfill.

In between scolding Cookie and Perla for trying to eat ladybugs, Petra suggests taking care of Alejo at the bungalow. Perfecto is reluctant to take on the responsibility, especially since Petra's legs have swollen so much that she can barely stand up, but she says that if one of her children got sick, she would want someone to help him. It might even be a test from God. Perfecto says he won't "allow" it, but Petra just sits down and crosses her arms.

Petra's defiance of Perfecto's edict is a moment of female empowerment and agency. However, her worsening physical state and the difficulty of caring for the rambunctious children she already has hint at how ill-equipped she is to take on an additional responsibility. Motherhood is both a source of strength and a limiting factor in Petra's life.

In the end, Gumecindo and Perfecto carry Alejo to the bungalow and lay him in a makeshift bed. Previously, Alejo had been left alone for hours at a time while his cousin and friends worked; he's glad to know that at least he won't die alone now. Petra feeds him rice water and performs folk rituals to heal him. Once he wakes up to find her washing him and realizes that he's soiled himself; he hopes that Estrella doesn't know about this.

One of Petra's best qualities is her generosity, even when she has literally nothing to give besides tenderness and care. Her attitude contrasts starkly with the wider social indifference to the welfare of migrant workers.

For Alejo, the sensation of sleeping in a room full of children is new. When everyone is asleep, he notices Estrella's bare back and moves closer to cuddle against her skin. She's used to sleeping among many bodies and pushes closer against him. She smells like sweat and "Eagles' condensed milk," and her face seems relaxed as it never does when she's awake.

It's interesting that in describing Estrella's comforting scent, Alejo mentions the specific brand of milk. As many characters often do, he references consumer goods when thinking wistfully of security and stability that is just out of reach.

Perfecto wonders if Petra knows what's on his mind. He worries that his preoccupied attitude and search for extra jobs might be giving her hints. He's continued to dream that his first wife is calling to him; his dead child appears to him as well. He even dreams that Petra is pregnant. He wants the spirits to go away and let him take comfort in his new partner, but they won't. Alejo's appearance and probable death is the "final sign" urging him to go.

Perfecto is concealing his desire to leave the family from Petra, while she's hiding the incipient pregnancy that is making her legs swell. But while Petra's secret involves the assumption of new responsibilities, Perfecto's implies jettisoning existing ones.

In the cabin, Alejo wakes up to Cookie tickling his face. When he turns his head the other way, Perla is curiously touching the stubble on his face. He tells them go to away and they run out of the house, laughing.

Even though Alejo is in dire straits, being surrounded by a family instead of left alone is an important improvement for him.

Perfecto carefully checks over his car. It desperately needs a new battery, and Perfecto hopes that by tearing down the barn he can buy one and leave the leftover money to the family. As he supervises Ricky and Arnulfo gathering firewood, he wonders where his own children are and how they managed to drift away from him. The twins run outside to tell him that Alejo woke up, but for some reason Perfecto recoils from the feeling of their clammy hands in his.

Cars are supposed to give drivers greater control of their destinies, but as Perfecto looks over the station wagon, he reflects on his inability to prevent the dissolution of his family. In fact, the car represents Perfecto's lack of control over the events of his life.

In a flashback, Petra remembers a long, hot walk with her children to the grocery store. While they wait for a chance to cross the highway, they see a beautiful green car pull into the gas station on the other side. Petra and Estrella lift up the twins and run across the road; the mother warns the children that soon they'll have to learn to cross on their own.

Even as she observes this expensive car, Petra must usher her children across a dangerous highway on foot. In this scenario, the car represents the enormous gulf between her life and middle-class America.

Walking past the car, Petra eyes its pristine seats. She's jealous that its owner can travel so quickly from one place to another. He must be "a man who knew his neighbors well" and "who could tell where the schools and where the stores were" in his town "and where the Nescafe jars in the stores were located." The boys haven't crossed the road yet, and Petra shouts to them when it's safe, earning a stare from the car's owner.

Petra uses the imagery of consumer goods to articulate the car owner's relative wealth. But her depiction of him as settled and secure in his home shows that she values these good insofar as they denote tranquility and stability, not in and of themselves.

In front of the store, a woman in high heels is wrangling the vending machine. She stares at Estrella, who silently points at a coin she's dropped. The twins coo at the growling watchdog, although Petra warns them to stay away from it. She tells them to stay on the porch; when they see the candy inside, they always start misbehaving, causing Petra to spank them and then regret her anger. The store owner is sitting over a ledger "as thick as the Bible."

Petra has to leave her children outside the store because when she brings them inside, the limits of her ability to provide for them become too painfully apparent. Meanwhile, the well-dressed woman is carelessly dropping money on the floor while she makes her purchases. The distance between their lives could not be more apparent.

In the back room, someone swears in Spanish and Petra tuts at his language. The unseen man is trying to fix some pipes. Petra scans the aisles, constantly doing math in her head to determine what she can and can't buy. The produce selection is meager and old, nothing like the firm fruit she harvests in the fields. Watching over her as she shops are posters of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Marilyn Monroe.

Even though she's largely excluded from her society, Petra clings to certain social norms, like good language, that give her and her children a sense of dignity. The difference between the fruit she harvests and the produce she's able to afford emphasizes how little her difficult labor actually benefits her.

As Petra roots around for a good bulb of garlic, she sees another hand in the bin and notices a tall and wiry man (Perfecto) across from her. He looks old – but then, everyone who works in the fields is prematurely aged. The man chooses a particularly good bulb and gives it to Petra, who remarks on its pungency to an unimpressed Estrella. She shakes the man's hand before he picks up his tool chest and walks to the storeowner, who says that since he fixed the pipes, his bill is paid.

Perfecto's actions often communicate the value of work to those around him. Because of his skill with his tools, he's able to interact with the storeowner as an equal. Perhaps one of the reasons Petra embarks on a relationship with him is a desire to share in the dignity he exudes even in the most trying of circumstances.

Petra continues to smell the garlic, which she will use to cure stomachaches, ease the pain in her veins, and spice her chili. After she pays for the groceries and leaves the store, the twins tell her that a "nice man" (Perfecto) gave them some ice to eat. Petra feels that the strange man is someone she can trust. Perla throws a piece of her ice to the watchdog and says she loves him.

Instead of relying on medicine or painkillers, Petra uses garlic to cure household ailments. This shows her resourcefulness and her ability to live intimately with the natural world around her, but it also emphasizes her inability to access remedies that most Americans take for granted.

In the morning in the present, Petra wakes up next to Perfecto and looks at the sheet that separates them from the children. She hears Alejo and Estrella murmuring to each other; her daughter tells the boy not to worry about his illness, since Petra has been throwing up a lot too. Estrella says that she's worried about Ricky and Arnulfo, who don't yet know how to work well in the sun. She asks him about his dreams, and they argue about whether or not she can remember hers. Alejo moves to hold Estrella, just as Petra is clinging to Perfecto. Petra wonders if she is healing the boy so he can "take" her daughter.

Petra is suspicious of Estrella's new relationship with Alejo partly because she sees her own decline into old age reflected in her daughter's new romance. More broadly, based on her own experience with her husband, she's convinced that Estrella can only get into trouble by growing up and becoming involved with men. The mistreatment and poverty that Petra has endured exacerbates the natural maternal worry she experiences while watching her daughter grow up.

Alejo asks Estrella what grade she's in, and if she plans to work in the fields forever. Petra is annoyed at the question – after all, if Estrella didn't work, Alejo wouldn't eat. Estrella says that there's nothing wrong with "picking the vegetables people'll be eating for dinner," but even she admits she doesn't want to do it. Petra's hand wanders over Perfecto's body and he grabs it for a second – but just to push it away.

In her mild rebuke of Alejo, Estrella mimics Petra's earlier comment, showing how deeply her outlook and character are shaped by her mother. Yet, Perfecto's quiet rejection of Petra shows that mother and daughter are at markedly different stages in their lives, especially with regard to their male partners.

Petra sits up and gets dressed, struggling to fasten her skirt around her belly. Every day seems like "a tight squeeze of a belt upon a belly." Watched by a crow, she crouches by the cooking pit and performs a ritual she knows by heart: combining flower, lard, and water to make tortillas. She doesn't even have to be fully awake to do this. She fills the insides with potatoes and makes a stack for a lunch that will both fill the children up and "make them hungry for more."

Petra's growing belly forecasts the realization of her pregnancy that will soon dawn on all the characters. Even though Petra loves her children and cares for them devotedly here, she describes pregnancy as claustrophobic and oppressive, showing that her poverty and isolation prevent motherhood from being a fully positive experience.

As Estrella comes out of the bungalow, Petra notices how tall she is. Soon she'll begin menstruating; the thought reminds Petra of her own missed periods. She remembers how scared she was the first time it happened to her and feels sad that nothing she can do will stop Estrella from growing up or keep her "heart from falling into the ground."

It's a good thing that Estrella is growing tall and strong, but Petra just sees this as proof that her daughter will soon be in a predicament like her own. Due to the harshness of her own life, Petra's conception of her daughter's future is static and fatalistic, with no room for improvement and no possibility that Estrella's path will diverge from her own.

Estrella wishes that it would rain so they could stay home from the fields. She feels that there will never be an escape from this work. Perfecto walks silently past her; Estrella knows that he will stay taciturn until she agrees to help him with the barn. Reproachfully, Petra says that she and Alejo are "like birds that make too much noise." She tells Estrella that she's starting something serious, but Perfecto isn't listening and asks her about the barn again.

Perfecto's growing obsession with the barn shows his desire to disentangle himself from the family's problems. While Petra accepts that she will always be limited by her responsibility for her children, she discourages Estrella from involvement with Alejo because she doesn't want her daughter to take on such responsibilities so soon.

Later that day, Petra takes Alejo onto the porch for some air. Some days he's better than others, but she hasn't healed him as she thought she could; he only shows any energy when Estrella returns from work. Cookie and Perla play near the porch while Petra cleans nopales (cactus) to eat later. She doesn't know how long the family can continue to support the young boy, but she also knows she has to take care of him because of the way she would want people to care for her children.

Being a mother causes Petra to feel responsibility not just for her own children, but for other people's. Viramontes argues that, even though being a mother is often a difficult and unpleasant experience, it causes a transformation of female identity and a realignment of priorities, while men are allowed to cling to their individual identities regardless of their obligations as parents.

Petra is also troubled by the continued swelling of her legs and Perfecto's strange attitude. Suddenly she feels sick and walks to the side of the house, where she throws up against a wall. She covers the vomit with dirt. She feels that she's failed a test. That night, she sleeps next to Estrella, thinking of the "lima bean in her" and wondering if it will be born without a mouth.

By describing the fetus as a "lima bean" and worrying about birth defects, Petra links her pregnancy to her work in the fields and implicitly demonstrates how this work, and her total lack of protections and rights, makes it almost impossible for her to take on the burden of a sixth child.

The next day, Estrella asks Perfecto how he wants to manage the barn. He predicts that if they both work on it, it will take three weeks of work. Meanwhile, he's slicing the calluses off his feet and heating up water to burst a boil. Estrella says that Alejo needs a doctor, hoping that Perfecto will pay for the visit if she helps with the barn. Perfecto is taken aback because he expected her to ask him to take Petra to the doctor. Estrella is uneasy that he thinks her mother is "that sick," and resentful that he's making her choose between them.

Both Perfecto and Estrella are increasingly alarmed about the physical condition of Alejo and Petra. Yet while Estrella is preparing to take more and more adult responsibility for her family, Perfecto wants to tear down the barn in order to leave it forever. Estrella's resentment of Perfecto suggests that, on a subconscious level, she's already aware of this.

Estrella remarks that they should do the job soon, before someone else does. Perfecto places a heated and sterilized glass bottle over the boil and curses as it bursts. Estrella presses the tender spot.

Occurring just as they're discussing a doctor's visit, Perfecto's ability to cure his own ailments emphasizes how little access the family has to social services like medical care.

The next day, the family prepares to visit the clinic, but the car's back wheel immediately gets stuck in the mud. Perfecto curses and Petra reprimands him. Everyone gets out of the car except for Alejo, who is wrapped in blankets in the back. They all try to push the bumper out of the mud, but there's no success. Knowing what to do, the children gather rocks and twigs, while Perfecto shifts Alejo in order to retrieve his crowbar from the back of the car. He's disturbed by the way Alejo's toes have been shaped by his badly-fitting shoes.

Rather than allowing the family to move from place to place, the car fails them when they need it most. In this sense, it emblematizes their lack of opportunity and entrapment in poverty. That Alejo's body has been physically shaped by his bad shoes reflects the extent to which his mind and life are shaped by the conditions of poverty.

As Perfecto starts to dig a hole around the tire, he becomes sweaty and his glasses slip. Estrella gently moves him out of the way and starts shoveling herself. Soon she's up to her calves in mud and feels as if she's sinking constantly. When she's dug a big enough hole, she begins lining it with rocks. She thinks of the prehistoric girl Alejo once spoke about, who fell into the La Brea tar pits. Only her bones remained to be found; every detail of her life and thoughts disappeared.

Out of everyone in the family, Estrella is now the physically strongest – which, at times like this, means she has to take responsibility for everyone's well-being. While Estrella never shies away from this responsibility, she does feel that it entails the loss of her personal identity: the grim job of digging out the car makes her imagine herself slipping into the tar pits, leaving no trace of her existence behind.

As she's seen Perfecto do before, Estrella lines the hole with rocks and then covers them with broken twigs in order to create traction for the tire. The task takes an hour, and by the end her hands and clothes are covered in mud. When she signals to Perfecto, he starts the motor and everyone tenses in anticipation—but the tire only spins and sinks deeper into the mud. The car is still stuck, and Estrella's hard work has come to nothing.

Even though Estrella has worked with diligence and skill, she still hasn't succeeded in digging out the car. Her failure shows that hard work on an individual level is often insufficient to overcome the social barriers that keep people trapped in poverty, along with simple bad luck.

CHAPTER FOUR

At long last, the family arrives at the clinic, a white trailer in an empty lot. As they pull in the gas gauge hits empty, not moving when Perfecto checks if it's stuck. Even after he removes the key the car continues to clank and grumble. He sits behind the wheel as if the rest of the family has exhausted him beyond repair. Petra also sits quietly until Estrella gets out, marshals the family, and marches into the clinic.

After taking physical responsibility for the car, Estrella also takes on the mental responsibility of overseeing the clinic visit. As she handles critical decisions in the next chapters, Estrella will emerge as the uneasy and reluctant head of her family, even as she realizes how powerless she is to advocate for them.

In fact, they only managed to get here by luck – after hours of laboring over the car, some piscadores showed up and helped them push it out of the ditch. The men look briefly at Alejo but seem determined not to talk about him or his illness. Petra feels disappointed that they put so much effort into arriving at this uninspiring, makeshift building. Perfecto tests the poles that uphold the clinic and notices how they wobble, hoping to barter his services for care.

The piscadores' willingness to help with the car indicates the spirit of community among the impoverished laborers, but their silence on Alejo's condition indicates their fatalistic view of his prospects, and emphasizes Estrella's isolation as she tries to actively defeat his illness.

Inside, the empty clinic smells like "bad plumbing." Estrella guides Alejo to a chair and everyone waits uneasily for the doctor. As the fan rotates slowly and no one appears, they wonder if the clinic is even open. Perfecto runs his hands over the walls, looking for "signs of disrepair." The twins explore the long counter full of gauze pads and cotton balls.

Perfecto knows that he can pay a fair price for Alejo's care with his own labor, but this potential trade depends on the staff recognizing and respecting the value of his work, and is thus uncertain.

The cotton looks white and fake to Petra, nothing like the material she harvests in the fields. Seeing the scale reminds her of all the times she wet her cotton or put rocks in her sack to make it weigh more. For her, scales are the arbiters of how much she's worth and how much she gets to eat. Perfecto catches sight of himself in a mirror; his reflection looks dirty and old.

Like Estrella's earlier observation about the raisin boxes at the supermarkets, Petra's thoughts now indicate how invisible her labor is in the society around her; moreover, they show that this erasure makes it impossible for her to feel at ease in that society.

Suddenly, a young woman emerges from the bathroom; she's wearing fresh lipstick and seems disappointed to see them. As Estrella explains that Alejo is ill, she realizes how dirty she and her clothes are, especially compared to this uniformed woman. The nurse is clearly annoyed to postpone her departure, but she retrieves her stethoscope out of the door. On her desk is a photo of two grinning boys.

The clinic visit is one of Estrella's only interactions with someone outside her own socioeconomic status. Throughout this episode, the nurse's appearance and behavior will remind her of her own poverty and the gulf between her and the middle-class (and white) society this woman represents.

The nurse asks Estrella about Alejo's personal information and origins. Estrella lies about his last name and says that he's a relative. She has to translate everything the nurse says to Petra, who is standing by impatiently. Estrella asks how much the doctor will charge, but the nurse says that only she will examine Alejo, since the doctor won't come to the clinic for another month. Cloyingly, the nurse asks Estrella to tell Alejo to get on the scale; she tersely explains that he's from Texas and therefore speaks perfect English.

Petra and Perfecto's inability to speak with the nurse emphasizes the leadership role that Estrella is unwillingly acquiring. Meanwhile, the nurse's assumption that Alejo doesn't speak English shows that because of his race, it's impossible for her to consider him a "real" American – even though Estrella has told her more than once where he was born.

With difficulty and Estrella's help, Alejo drags himself onto the scale. The resistance of his body reminds her of the futile task of pushing the car out of the hole: both moments seem to prove that "God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself." She wants to return to the cool, dark barn and cry.

For Estrella, each new assumption of responsibility convinces her of the pointlessness of her labor. Growing up erases her earlier sense of possibility and causes her to acquire her mother's fatalism.

The nurse makes some notes and then helps Alejo to an examination table, asking why Estrella didn't bring him in sooner. She banishes everyone from the exam room except for Estrella, who speaks English. Petra mistrusts all the nurse's writing, and she's annoyed by her carnation perfume, which is so noxious to pregnant women that she wants to vomit. Everything on the nurse's desk – from the boys smiling too hard to the cloyingly sweet kitten statuette, and even the nurse's overly clean appearance – seems like a sign of falsity.

The nurse's photos and kitten statues seem like the innocuous accessories of an American workplace, but to Petra they represent the middle-class society which both relies on migrant labor and refuses to respect the people who perform that level. The novel encourages the reader to observe the hypocrisy that underpins many scenes of "typical" American life.

Alejo says he doesn't want Estrella to watch the examination, but the nurse reassures him that she'll stand behind a curtain. Petra spits into a trash can and wonders aloud about the cost of the visit.

Petra's irreverence for the nurse is a way of reminding herself that she has value, even in the midst of an encounter that devalues and disrespects her.

The nurse concludes that Alejo has dysentery, but she has no way to test her hypothesis; he needs to go to the hospital in Corazón before he becomes too dehydrated. Petra and Perfecto are frustrated and resentful when Estrella translates this verdict, saying that it's not their responsibility to take him to the hospital. Estrella angrily reminds her mother that Gumecindo has gone back to Texas; there is no one except them to take him. Petra points out that Alejo doesn't have papers with him, or money to pay for medical care. The twins ask if Alejo is going to die, and Petra sends them outside. Perfecto asks where Corazón is.

The nurse is both unable to provide meaningful care and clearly uninterested in Alejo's predicament – showing that even when the family manages to get to the clinic, they don't enjoy the standard of care accorded to more privileged patients. Estrella's stalwart acceptance of the new responsibility of getting Alejo to the hospital shows that she's growing into her mother's shoes – even if it puts her in opposition to Petra at this moment.

All the while, Alejo lies on the examination table and Estrella holds his hand. She notices that his body is unnaturally white. The nurse returns to her desk and says magnanimously that although the visit is supposed to cost fifteen dollars, she'll only charge ten, because "times are hard these days." Estrella looks at the nurse, thinking about "how easily she put herself in a position to judge." She tells Perfecto the price and Petra explodes in anger, asking why they have to pay so much simply for the nurse to confirm what they already knew.

The nurse's offer and Estrella's offended reaction shows the fundamental disconnect between the different social classes they represent. The nurse thinks she's doing something charitable, but she's still just siphoning away the family's scarce resources.

Perfecto opens his wallet and pulls out eight dollar bills. With the change in his pocket, he's able to put together $9.07. Estrella asks if Perfecto can fix the toilet and the wall in exchange for the visit, but the nurse dismisses this offer and collects their money. She says that she's not allowed to authorize repairs. She carefully sorts out all the coins into a cash box, which she locks in the drawer.

Perfecto's ability to provide for the family with his mechanical skill depends on people valuing that skill – which the nurse clearly doesn't. While the inherent dignity of work can give satisfaction on an individual level, it often fails to provide social rights or benefits.

Estrella explains to Alejo that he will get sicker unless he goes to a hospital. Alejo hazily asks her to take him home, which frustrates Estrella since she doesn't know how to do that. The nurse urges them to hurry up, because she needs to pick up her kids. Estrella doesn't know what to do; they can't really leave the clinic, as they don't have enough money to go anywhere else. The situation seems especially unfair given that the clinic visit was so unhelpful.

Frustrated at Alejo's confused request, Estrella realizes that even as she takes on new responsibilities, she can't really fulfill any of them. It's impossible for her to get Alejo back to Texas, or even care for him in California. While they used to relate to each other as young lovers, his dependence on her now likens him to her younger siblings and emphasizes her lonely position as head of the family.

Estrella stares at the exhausted Perfecto and tries to think. She wonders if she's experiencing the kind of panic that has plagued her mother for years. She wishes that the nurse would agree to barter – then she would at least have enough money to get Alejo to the hospital. She resents the woman's refusal to compromise; after all, she was suggesting a trade, not begging for money.

Perfecto and Petra's inaction shows Estrella that she has to think of a solution to this problem. Her deep identification with Petra at this moment shows that she conceives of motherhood as a long period of "panic," rather than a pure relationship between a woman and her children.

Estrella thinks back to the tar pits. It seems that her family's bones create the oil in the pits, the oil that makes the nurse's car to run and allows her to pick up her kids. Really, the nurse owes them more than they owe her.

The nurse sees Estrella and her family as people who depend on her for charity. But with her deep knowledge of her own labor, Estrella reframes the situation to show that in fact it's the middle class that is deeply indebted to the migrants on whom it depends.

Estrella walks out of the clinic towards the car, where Ricky and Arnulfo are playing. She opens the trunk, pulls out the crowbar, and stalks back in. Perfecto, Petra, and Alejo watch as she holds the crowbar over the nurse and tells her to give them back the money. She threatens to smash everything in the clinic; when the nurse tries to protest, she brings the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the photograph of the children. The nurse starts to cry. Estrella holds out her hand.

In one of her early flashbacks, Estrella held Perfecto's crowbar and remarked on the "significance it awarded her." Back then, she thought the tools were an avenue to a meaningful existence within American society. Now the crowbar gives her power, but it's a power that establishes her as a criminal in the eyes of society and cements her marginalization.

Shakily, the nurse retrieves the cash box and counts out $9.07. Now that she has it, Estrella doesn't even want to hold the money. She feels like two girls: one who does chores for her mother, and another who threatens people for money. The bills feel as sweaty as her dirty body. She says that the nurse should have let Perfecto fix the plumbing, but the other woman is too busy sobbing to listen.

Referencing the tar pits, Estrella articulated how the work of providing for her family subsumes her thoughts and identity. Here, providing for her family warps her identity by forcing her to express a harsh and violent side of her character that she doesn't particularly like.

Near the clinic, Perfecto buys five dollars worth of gas. Estrella looks out the window, where she can see a valley full of grapes and some piscadores. Alejo asks weakly if Estrella hurt the nurse. Wearily, Estrella muses that "they make you that way" by refusing to listen until "you pick up a crowbar." Alejo asks again if Estrella hurt the nurse, and tells her that it's not worth it. She becomes frustrated and thinks that he's being impractical. Alejo tells her not to "make it so easy for them."

Estrella's remark implicitly argues that criminal behavior is often caused by desperation, not bad character. Alejo's exhortation not to "make it easy for them" expresses his persisting aspiration to succeed within American society, but Estrella is now convinced that she can only interact with that society as a powerless migrant or a menacing figure with a crowbar.

Still looking out the window, Estrella remembers a long-ago visit to a ranch store filled with bell peppers in brilliant colors. At the time, the arrangement of fruits had seemed miraculous, and Estrella was about to point it out to Petra when a woman plucked up a few peppers, disrupting the work of arranging the fruit in an instant.

Estrella's memory argues that all beautiful things in her life – from the arrangement of produce to her relationship with Alejo – are frighteningly fragile, liable to crumble at an instant.

Frustrated, Estrella tells Alejo that he's being stupid, but he insists that "they want us to act like that." Estrella doesn't want to keep talking about this, because none of Alejo's protests can change what she did. She reflects that for her, neither "Elvis's glitter" nor "the heavenly look of La Virgen" are as beautiful as the idea of the bell pepper.

Here, Estrella invokes consumer goods and religion, the two things that often signify stability to Petra. For her, neither of these things are as comforting as the joy derived from the beautiful environment or intimate relationships with others. This is both a demonstration of Estrella's disillusionment with her society and an important affirmation of the power of one's inner life, rather than external institutions, to provide fulfillment.

Petra says that the nurse had better not call the police. Estrella reassures her, saying that she and Perfecto will start tearing down the barn tomorrow. Perfecto feels the car struggling beneath them, and knows that it makes "no promises." Ricky says hopefully that they should stay in one place for a while, but when Petra, indulging him, consults Perfecto, he concurs without really meaning what he's saying.

Estrella's new willingness to tear down the barn – which has been her refuge and allowed her to cultivate her own identity – reflects her brave willingness to sacrifice that identity for her family's welfare. Yet, it's clear that even that sacrifice probably won't provide them with the stability that Ricky so plaintively wishes for.

Perfecto exits the highway and follows signs for the hospital. The twins are fidgeting and drawing faces in the window. When he pulls into the parking lot, Perfecto keeps the ignition running because he's worried that the battery will die. He instructs Estrella to take Alejo inside and leave him; the nurses will take it from there. Estrella thanks him and hauls Alejo out of the car. Watching them walk away, Perfecto reflects that although he's "given this country his all," no one has ever thanked him as sincerely as this young girl.

Like Estrella, Perfecto has despaired of finding a meaningful place in American society, which fundamentally disregards his contributions. The only alleviations of his oppression are the personal connections he forms with those who share his plight, just as one of Estrella's few comforts in her isolation is her strong bond with Petra.

In a few minutes, Estrella reemerges from the hospital, feeling empty without Alejo by her side. To impress the twins, she makes a big show of exiting through the automatic door. Cookie and Perla can't believe their eyes; they fight to sit next to Estrella in the car and feel warm and safe all the way home, thinking that their sister has the power to "split glass in two."

The twins' perception of Estrella as powerful and awe-inspiring contrasts with her actual powerlessness – she set out to cure Alejo and has been forced to leave him alone in the hospital.

CHAPTER FIVE

When the car pulls up beside the bungalow, the headlights sweep across the few possessions they'd left outside that morning. Everyone sits still for a minute in the creaking station wagon. Eventually, Petra walks into the bungalow with difficulty and stamps on some lurking insects. Perfecto and Estrella follow, carrying the sleeping children.

Despite all the effort and stress of the day, the family is basically back where it started. Again, the car represents the stasis of their life and their inability to improve their circumstances, no matter how hard they try.

Perfecto closes the car doors and watches as Petra drags a stick in the dirt around the bungalow, recreating the protective circle against scorpions. He feels that he needs to think, and doesn't want to talk to her. He wishes he had a cigarette. He's almost sure that the nurse has called the police, who are probably searching for them in the labor camps right now.

It seems that the events of the day have strengthened Perfecto's isolation from the family. His panicked observation that he "needs to think" mirrors Estrella's earlier comment, but his alienation contrasts starkly with her strong identification with her family.

He can't decide whether his remaining money – $4.07 – is enough for him to "bail out." He wonders "what has happened to his instincts"; he should be running to save himself right now, just as he would pull out an arrow if it was shot into his belly. When Perfecto puts his head in his hands, Petra wonders if he's crying. He has a hunch that she will tell about her pregnancy tonight. He's too old to start another family, especially with a woman so much younger.

It's understandable that Perfecto has anxieties about Petra's pregnancy; after all, she's dreading it as well. However, on a fundamental level he disowns responsibility for the child, while Petra mutely accepts whatever additional burdens it will cause. Their society exempts men from caring for their children while expecting women to singlehandedly bear responsibility for them.

Perfecto tells himself to think clearly. The nurse wasn't really hurt at all, and anyway if she called the authorities they would probably have been arrested by now. Maybe, he thinks hopefully, she just reapplied her lipstick and picked up her sons like nothing had happened. Perhaps she's drinking decaffeinated coffee right now and breezily telling her husband what happened at work today. This is the way Perfecto believes that "people who had couches and living rooms and television sets" behave.

Perfecto uses imagery of consumer goods – the home furnishings he will never have – to articulate the ease of the nurse's existence and the huge distance between his life and hers. In this moment her possessions represent not only her material wealth but her ability to harm him by leveraging her social position against the family.

Perfecto is desperate to load his tools and some peaches into the car. He can't tell if it's "love or simply" fear that's keeping him from doing so. It's silly to wait until the barn is pulled down; if he leaves now, with a few dollars and some gasoline in the car, "he would have a second chance." He's glad that he gave up smoking years ago; he's so nervous that if he had the chance right now, he would have spent the last of his money on cigarettes.

Perfecto's comparison of love and fear suggests that love can be a limiting force – as Estrella's love for the children causes her to sacrifice herself to provide for them. However, the older man's focus on getting a "second chance" more closely aligns him with Estrella's father, who behaved "as if his life belonged only to him."

Inside the bungalow, the children are quickly returning to sleep. Petra wonders how long it will be until the authorities wake them up. Maybe they'll even come with dogs. She wonders why she didn't stop Estrella at the clinic but concludes that no force can restrain her daughter or hold "back the will of her body." If Petra could've controlled her, she wouldn't have let her become involved with Alejo in the first place. She goes outside and inspects the circle Estrella once made, finding numerous breakages and retracing the line. She remembers how her mother kicked her out of the house when she became pregnant with Estrella.

Petra both takes pride in and deplores Estrella's strength and determination; it seems to her that in their harsh circumstances, even her daughter's best qualities can and will be used against her. By committing a crime, Estrella has made herself vulnerable just as her mother did by becoming pregnant as a teenager, yet they both find themselves in these positions due to the social pressures around them.

Petra sees Perfecto standing with his back to her. He once told her to trust him, but now she only trusts "Jesucristo." She returns inside and decides to make an offering in front of her icon. She feels Jesucristo's eyes watching her as she kneels and lights several candles around the statue's base. Smoke rises and one of the children sneezes. Petra straightens the doily underneath the statue, which her grandmother once crocheted. The old woman had spent days and nights crocheting, while people lived and died around her. Petra wishes she knew how to crochet and keep her prayers from becoming "soot above her."

The icon is one of the only possessions that goes everywhere with Petra. In a way, her reliance on the icon and the religion it represents replaces reliance on the consumer goods that normally furnish a home. It's also one of her few ways of maintaining a connection to her larger family, with whom she's no longer in contact.

Beneath the doily is a manila envelope, which Petra now opens, full of documents. There are five birth certificates with a footprint on each of them, making her children "legal" and enabling them to go to school or join the military. There are five baptism certificates and her own identification card, which allays her fear that she will die and "no one would know who she was." There are Holy Communion certificates for some of the children and an award for an essay Estrella once wrote. Last of all is her marriage certificate, from a ceremony that took place when she was four months pregnant. She got married after a long and complicated bus ride to the courthouse. No one had been able to talk her out of the idea.

Now it's clear what Petra meant when she told Estrella that her documents are "under the feet of Jesus." This arrangement represents both her faith in religion and her persistent belief, despite all evidence to the contrary, that if she follows the rules, society will treat her children fairly. At the same time, the phrase "under the feet of Jesus" seems to refer to the ground on which Jesus stands. Estrella and her siblings belong in America not just because they have the documents to prove it, but because they have a meaningful connection to the land.

Petra carefully refolds the documents and places them under the statue. She can't stand up unaided, so she leans on the crate that supports the icon, and Jesucristo trembles and suddenly tumbles to the floor, where his head breaks off. From the other side of the curtain Estrella asks what's wrong, and Petra tells her to go to sleep. Petra replaces the body on the crate and cradles the head, which is surprisingly light.

The icon's tumble represents Petra's loss of faith in all the things it represents to her – religion, the state, the possibility of a stable life. Even though she uses the icon to show her children that they belong in America, she can't guarantee that others will treat them this way.

Petra walks to the porch and looks out at Perfecto, who is still leaning on the car. She's intensely cognizant of the "lima bean in her stomach" and wishes she could crochet the long night away. Suddenly, it seems possible that scorpions have already invaded the bungalow; the stick she used for protection now looks "slight and feeble." All she has to protect her children are "papers and sticks and broken faith and Perfecto," and none of these things seem very effective right now. She hopes that Perfecto can fix the statue.

Petra's new fears about the scorpions represent the crisis of faith that has accompanied the fall of the Jesucristo statue. All the things in which she once believed are now reduced to their unimposing physical manifestations – "papers and sticks" – and devoid of the spiritual significance with which she had invested them. In a way, Petra comes of age through this loss of faith just as Estrella grows up through a realization of her own limited power.

Hoping for some fresh air, Estrella forces the bungalow window open. She remembers how Alejo begged her to stay with him in the hospital waiting room. He was so frightened, and she was unable to comfort him; meanwhile, the car was burning precious gasoline while the family waited for her. At the time she reassured him briskly that the doctors would take care of him, but now she has to acknowledge that she might never see him alive again.

At the hospital, Estrella has to choose between her bond to Alejo and her obligations to her family. Moreover, she has to realize that no matter whom she chooses to support, there's very little she can do to concretely improve the lives of those around her.

Estrella takes off her muddy dress. She feels filthy and exhausted, "as if her body had been beaten into a pulp of ligaments and cartilage." Suddenly, she hears something shatter on the other side of the curtain; she asks her mother if she needs help but is only ordered to bed. Estrella picks up the lantern and goes out to the porch, where Petra hugs her so tightly that it feels like she's "trying to hide her back in her body."

Petra keeps the broken icon to herself; it's a moment of distance from her daughter. However, her tight embrace is an attempt to overcome that distance and to halt the coming-of-age process that naturally draws Estrella away from her.

Disregarding Petra's warnings, Estrella walks toward the barn with the lantern, soon breaking into a run. She can hear dogs and coyotes in the distance. Inside the barn is dark and soothing, although the owls above startle her. As her eyes adjust to the gloom, she sees the heavy chain that leads to a loft and the trapdoor to the roof. Estrella takes off her shoes and socks and ties up her hair. Then she grabs the chain and starts shimmying her way up.

Estrella is only able to feel totally at ease with herself within the barn. While this is a soothing moment, it's qualified by the knowledge that the barn will soon be demolished. Likewise, it now seems inevitable that Estrella's strength and identity will be eroded by the ongoing crises in her life.

As Estrella moves up the chain with difficulty, splinters and dust rain down from above. Her biceps and legs are straining with the effort, and she knows she can't look down. Finally, soaked with sweat, she reaches the loft, which is covered in bird droppings. Looking for the trapdoor, she walks across the loft and accidentally kicks a glass bottle to the floor. She looks down to see it shatter, realizing how far she's climbed.

Estrella's ability to shimmy up the heavy chain emphasizes her strength – both physical and emotional. However, the sudden crash of the glass bottle to the ground represents the fragility of everything around her.

When Estrella first pushes the trapdoor, it refuses to move. She feels for a bolt or lock, but there's nothing holding the door closed. She has to shove it with her entire body in order to overcome its resistance and emerge onto the roof. Reaching the open air, Estrella is stunned by the "violently sharp" stars. Birds are flying around, and she's surprised that they never crash into each other. It seems logical that "the angels had picked a place like this to exist."

As in other moments in the novel, the stunning beauty of the environment contrasts starkly with the desperate circumstances of all the characters. Although Estrella seems to take comfort in the thought that "angels" live here, her comment is qualified by the loss of faith that her mother has just experienced.

Estrella carefully steadies herself on the slanted roof. Shingles crumble beneath her feet "like the serpent under the feet of Jesus" and she feels she can trust her feet and her body to keep her safe. At the edge of the roof, she stops and feels the wind brushing against her face. Birds start to land near her, and she remains "immobile as an angel." She has to believe that her heart is "powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed."

Comparing herself to Jesus, Estrella invests herself with divine agency, but given the recent crash of the Jesucristo icon, it's not clear if this agency really means much. Moreover, by acknowledging that she can do nothing but hope "those who strayed" will return, she acknowledges the limitations of her power. The novel ends by affirming Estrella's personal strength and also suggesting the futility of pitting that strength against a hostile outside world.

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